

A Metaphor of Primitivism: Cannibals and Cannibalism in French Anthropological Thought of the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

19th century anthropological thought was obsessed with the phenomenon of cannibalism, as reported by travellers, missionaries and incipient scientists, although the theme is ancient and appears frequently in occidental mythology. Anthropological discourse swiftly developed competing views of the phenomenon, ranging from deep-seated atavistic urges (bestialism) to ritualistic practices (culturalism). Here, classification of cannibalistic practices offers insight into this problem.

INTRODUCTION

Among all the criteria recognised as the basis of the “singular other”, the consumption of human flesh is certainly the most emotionally significant. More disconcerting or more hateful than incest, anthropophagia was rapidly established as one of the fundamental elements of the structure¹ of anthropological thought in the 19th century. It was however making use of an ancient topic, in the sense that cannibalism has always been established as the classic factor to draw the line between humanity and savagery in the imagination of European societies (Sténou 1998: 52). This construct also appeared in the first reports of western travellers in the Old World (Malaysia, New Guinea, and Africa) and notably in the New World (the Tupinambas of Brazil, the Indians of the Caribbean, the Aztecs of Mexico). It simply reinforced the western founding myths of “otherness” as established by the Egyptians,² as well as Greek and Nordic mythology. Thus, Columbus arriving on the northern coast of Cuba would record, according to this tradition, what the Arawak said of other peoples, such as the Monoculi and the Cynocephales who lived further to the east and had already been described in the Western world by Pliny, Saint Augustine and Isidore of Seville (Lestringant, 1994).

All this must be understood in the perspective of western mythologies, of which the Greek world was the epitome of a model of order, in the sense given by Gernet (1982), that of the Cosmos. The Lestrygons, giant cannibals who

devoured strangers, are part of this cosmos, as are the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* (among them Polyphemus), and they actually formed a mythical fraternity representing a possible inversion of the established order, transforming humans into food. Numerous mythological Greek tales have integrated anthropophagia in the management of conflicts: one rarely eats the other for pleasure – except Tydeus eating the brain of Melanippos, or Candules, king of Lydia, so greedy for food that he devoured his own wife: one eats for vengeance or provocation. Thus, Lycaon prepares a meal for Zeus in which he offers him the limbs of Arcas, his son by Calypso; Atreus killed the three sons of Thyestes and had them served to their father as a course in a banquet; Harpalyce, daughter of Clymenos, the king of Arcadia who committed incest with her, out of vengeance fed her father her three young brothers (of which one would have been her own son); Procne feeds her husband Tereus the flesh of their own son, as vengeance for his cruelty and awful behaviour towards her sister Philomele. The body of man also becomes food in the *Odyssey*, when Circe transforms Odysseus' companions into pigs (Grimal, 1986). So, from the beginning of the development of Mediterranean societies, “man meat” is a throwback to the biological reality of human nature: the fact that we are animals, thus a possible food, or “consumable” in nutritional terms.

The inventory presented by Amunategui (1971) concerning “beasts” considered edible in our society is particularly instructive. The fact that he begins his book by mentioning cannibals reveals the necessary distance to be maintained between consumers and consumed, disgust and desire. In fact, western myths that include references to cannibalism make of it a sacrificial subject, verging on the religious by any standards, and not as a foodway. Anthropologists of the past century would attempt to interpret anthropophagia from a perspective of knowledge of the diversity of customs to be found in humans. The transition from cannibalism to religious anthropophagia became a necessary transition from nature to culture.

THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS' ANTHROPOPHAGY

Within the first year of the establishment, in 1860, of the Anthropological Society of Paris, an important debate took place on the question of anthropophagia. It began with a paper given by Monsieur de Rochas on the

New Caledonians, which was read during the 24th meeting of the Society, on July 5th 1860, which in turn provoked a discussion on the understanding and interpretation of the practice of cannibalism. Monsieur Boudin, in this first encounter, raised the question of whether this type of practice was of nutritional or ritual nature among these people and if the New Caledonians preferred the flesh of their own to that of the Whites, which was reputed to be too salty, as Dumont d'Urville had heard mention in several archipelagos of Polynesia (Boudin, 1860). Questioned on this subject, Monsieur de Rochas answered that the practice was purely nutritional and that, in fact, the "natives" preferred the flesh of their own (Rochas, 1860). Monsieur de Castelnau then voiced his disagreement, opining that anthropophagia could only have a religious origin. Boudin then argued that a question so important for anthropology should not be lightly set aside, and suggested that it should be included in the themes for a later meeting (Broca, Quatrefages, Boudin, Rochas, Bertillon, Gosse, Castelnau, 1860). Boudin's idea was accepted and French anthropological literature on the subject has been relatively abundant until the end of the century.³ However, the theme would practically disappear from anthropological concerns after 1914.

Behind this more or less objective and serious discourse, anthropologists moved towards an attempt to establish classification of this phenomenon, in order to better understand the bases of human nature, and to unveil a system of hierarchy of human values in a strongly evolutionist perspective. That is why anthropophagia was classified into different categories which were supposed to be exclusive of each other, proceeding from "the more natural" to "the more cultural".

First came cannibalism for nutrition, which could be sporadic (because of famine, war, accidents...) or "gastronomical" (as described of the Marquesas, but also for New Zealand, Canaques, Papuans, Mexicans, Australians...). This first category, that belonged to "primitivism", was in contrast to a more cultural form of anthropophagia, which was ritualised, either through war or religion.⁴ And finally, a form described with much more ambiguity on the part of the anthropologists in so far as they wanted to classify it within the sphere of medicine: what we might call pathological cannibalism.⁵

TABLE 1
Endo- and exo-cannibalism in some societies

	<i>Ethnic group</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Source</i>
Endocannibalism	Tapuyas [strict social endocannibalism] (Rio Grande, South America)	Chiefs (Chiefs), warriors (warriors), children (mothers), elderly (children)	Flesh, bones pounded with maize, hair with honey	Jehan
Endocannibalism	Bhenderwas (Inde - As)	Elderly, incurably sick (family, friends)		Jehan
Endocannibalism	Fuegians (South America)	Elderly females (family)	Flesh	Nadaillac
Exocannibalism	Celebes (O)	Enemies	Heart	Jehan
Exocannibalism	Caribbean	Enemies (men)	Nape of neck, neck, buttocks, thighs, legs	Trélat
Exocannibalism (food)	Neo-caledonians	Enemies [not Europeans, flesh too salty]		Rochas
Mixed		Enemies + Sorcerers + Subjects		Montrouzier
Mixed	Bathas (Sumatra)	Adulterers, night thieves, blood relations, prisoners of war	Alive criminals: raw or grilled, salted, peppered and with lemon (must be eaten on the spot where killed) Forbidden to women 60 to 100 individuals a year	Jehan

If, as early as 1890, in *The Golden Bough* Frazer had associated cannibalism with the appropriation of virtues from the dead (Frazer, 1981-1984), French anthropologists rather took their positions from an evolutionist perspective, establishing anthropophagia as a milestone in cultural evolution for the better, since it moved away from the practice of consuming raw dead carcasses. For them, cannibalism signified the passage from nature to culture through the abandonment of the raw for the cooked. Actually, there is a possible rereading of anthropology through the prism of structuralism (Kilani, 1996).

The conclusion of this anthropological discourse seemed to be that the adoption of cannibalism followed by progressive rejection of it by human societies was considered to demonstrate manifest progress towards a model of civilisation; this evolution was described as “obvious” in the diachronic perspective of the evolution of our own societies, but it sometimes had to be “helped along” in the cases of societies that still condoned it to that day. Anthropophagia obviously constituted a phenomenon which situated societies outside civilisation; it demonstrated lack of aptitude to reach civilisation for peoples who still practised it (*Cf.* Corre, 1894: 452); and it could only signify madness or moral deviation when it appeared. (*Cf.* Marie and Zaborowski, 1931). The case of Léger, an imbecile suffering from melancholy, tried in 1824 and condemned to death, is famous in the annals of the anthropology of crime: he raped his expiring victim and ate her still palpitating heart. (Quoted by Trélat, 1870: 340)

One of the main questions to be answered by anthropology of the XIXth century was whether cannibalism had existed since the beginning of time among humans; that is, whether it had been a necessary stage in the process of development; whether it still existed; and in what kind of society it was to be found. The idea was to try to understand whether this practice was proof of the residual, persistent stamp of “nature” (which is to say, “bestiality”) or, on the other hand, a special form of cultural adaptation. In this way, cannibalism would be described successively in terms of persistent savagery and animality, particularly for authors like Jehan de Saint Clavier, Corre or Topinard; of decadence for Pruner-Bey; or, at the opposite end of the scale, as a form of social development for Vogt, Girard de Rialle, Letourneau or Zaborowski.

For the partisans of the idea of persistence of animality demonstrated by the practice of anthropophagia, all of whom generally belonged to the school of creationism and monogenism, cannibalism could still be found among certain groups. Jehan de Saint-Clavier, a monogenist, thought that among the “uncivilised” cannibalism was dominant, but “among the civilised nations it is only a sort of accidental phenomenon, isolated, and outside the bounds of civilisation” (Jehan de Saint-Clavier, 1853: 1035). This author however, becomes somewhat confused by the great number of reports and accounts on the subject, and when he attempts to present

the geographical distribution of the phenomenon, he mistakes his sources, and he states at the same time that 1) “Anthropophagia was no more widely distributed in the past than in the New World” (Jehan de Saint-Clavien, 1853: 1035), that 2) “It is useless to reproduce the long list of the anthropophagous peoples of Africa”; and 3), “It is especially in Oceania that one should look for cannibalism” (Jehan de Saint-Clavien, 1853: 1036). Finally he attempts to show that it is a regressive process:

We must recognise that man in the savage state is only an incomplete and unfinished creature. The persistence of certain appetites and their association to the coarse ideas and ferocious passions which maintain them, only show that the intellectual and moral parts are still stunted in their development. Is saying that cannibalism is one of the distinctive characters of the human species, as certain authors have maintained, not mutilating his nature and taking away from him that which is his essential attribute? If a civilised nation remained cannibal, it would be, in the order of society, what monsters are in the order of the physique. (Jehan de Saint-Clavien 1853: 1040)

Leaving aside ecological or nutritional reasons, anthropology has generally considered anthropophagia to be a phenomenon of a “status of mental inferiority” and not as a characteristic “of beasts and criminals” (Trélat, 1870: 304). Whatever the case, certain authors considered it would affect only the most inferior “races”, the most bestial, or those most incapable of the least refinement. Thus, for Topinard, cannibalism,

the most bestial act to be recorded in the annals of the human species, still exists in Australia, but is progressively disappearing. The majority of natives hide it from the whites [...] they would (on the Isaac River) sacrifice plump young girls on certain feasts, and even children would be raised for this ignoble aim. The preferred morsels would be the leg and the hand. What could be the reason for this custom? Everything points to the need for food. There has been talk of expeditions when prisoners were dismembered and devoured. (Topinard, 1872: 289)

In contrast to Jehan de Saint-Clavien or Topinard, who are content to simply pass on reported facts, the physician Armand Corre recommends radical intervention against the practice of anthropophagia in the

establishment of a colony: “But it is not admissible, in any degree whatsoever, that a civilised nation which has become a civilising one should tolerate negative acts. The European does not have to respect ritual sacrifice and cannibalism wherever he finds them well established.” (Corre, 1894: 10) For Corre “The white criminal remains European, as the black criminal remains African [...and] one could not mention progressive evolution to explain this fact for the black, and mention it at the same time as retrogressive evolution to explain criminality in Europeans.” (Corre, 1889: 377)

On the other hand, for the supporters of the “evolutionist” tendency (Vogt, Letourneau, Zaborowski), anthropophagia is certainly an indispensable step for the development of a complex social organisation (Vogt, 1871). “War starts with the origins of humanity. A tribe of hunters does not only hunt game; if this becomes scarce, the enemy himself becomes a source of food”, explains Ploix (1872: 26). “It seems certain that cannibalism is not primitive. It appears, at a certain degree of social organisation, consecutive to the development of inequalities which allow certain men to consider others as simple game.” (Zaborowski, 1891: 34) Vogt also, makes cannibalism a necessary stage of transition from the state of nature to that of culture: “Man, primitively a fructivore, must necessarily arrive through the progress of his development, to the consumption of human flesh, before then getting rid of this horrid custom through the purification brought on by his religious and humanitarian ideas.” (Vogt, 1871: 298) Letourneau tries to demonstrate that human progress is expressed in terms of social organisation and that it cannot be measured in terms of morality, in opposition to the classical statements of creationist and monogenist anthropologists of the times:

I have already had occasion to observe that, at least among primitives, there is no relation between the intellectual and moral sides of mentality. This point of view is fully confirmed by the study of cannibalism in Africa. Thus, in East Africa, the small population of the Momboutous, an Ethiopian race, is intellectually superior to its neighbours, for the most part of inferior race and less civilised. They treat them as they would game and organise hunting parties to procure meat. On the battle field they cut up and smoke the flesh of those they have killed. The prisoners are herded, like sheep, to be butchered for meat. (Letourneau, 1901: 109-110, quoting Schweinfurth, “The Heart of Africa”)

He then quotes Du Chaillu: “The same moral contrast, extremely interesting for the psychology of human races, has also been observed in West Africa, among the Fans [...] who buy the deceased of neighbouring tribes to eat them.” (Letourneau, 1901: 110, quoting Du Chaillu, *Voyage dans L’Afrique Equatoriale*) “In other places, customs of more than bestial savagery can coincide with a certain material civilisation.” (*Idem*: 110) The lawyer Royer-Collard even attempts to give it legal dimension, writing in the Encyclopedia of the XIXth Century: “It is by respect of the laws and institutions of their ancestors that the Batta are cannibals. These laws condemn adulterers, night robbers and prisoners to be eaten alive.” (Royer-Collard, 1869: 186)

Anthropophagia is thus situated in the history of human sacrifice. It is a communion and sacrifice intended to renew, by ritualised cannibalism, the alliance with the supernatural world and to appropriate, by incorporating the matter of the sacrifice, mysterious and powerful forces.

On all other occasions in which the Australian consumes human flesh or blood, there appears to be superstition and mysticism about the manner of behaving: the sorcerer must taste human flesh at least once in order to acquire supernatural powers; the warrior dips his spear in the blood to make it more deadly; the mother eats her dead child to keep her fertility. Among some tribes, the dead parents are eaten as an act of piety.” (Pruner-Bey, 1860)

Strabon had already written that the inhabitants of Ireland thought it respectable to devour the corpses of their parents. Thus they honour them, by giving them a grave which honours them.

Bordier offers another interpretation suggesting that, on the contrary, endocannibalism would have restricted all confidence and sense of mutual security in the midst of a primitive group (Bordier, 1888) and that therefore the equivalent of “matrimonial exogamy”, that is human “exophagy” (or exocannibalism), would have had to be established early on. They would then have made war on neighbouring tribes, and these, defeated, were eaten. But, so long as exophagy remained dangerous (because it calls for vengeance) they would have gone back to eating members of their group, mainly criminals. Bordier’s demonstration is perfect in the sense that it takes us back to endocannibalism after attempting to get out of it. This

essential concept of endocannibalism was somewhat later formalised by Steinmetz (1896) as the custom of eating one's parents or near relatives. He sees in it a natural remnant of the instincts of primitive man "when he wandered, solitarily, through virgin forests, without realising the possibility of forming a social group of any kind." (Steinmetz, 1896) For Deniker (1900), Steinmetz's theory faces great difficulty in so far as contemporary cannibal groups (such as the Australian tribes) avoid eating their own dead and exchange them with other clans so as to eat non-related individuals. This is what would be observed by Monsignor Le Roy in 1894, among the Fans, when he went up the Haut-Ogoüé in Gabon, where "the dear" deceased were consumed only by neighbours not related to the family." (Le Roy, 1911: 151) But, paradoxically among the same Fans, a criminal, or by default a member of his family, would be killed and eaten as an act of revenge, thus showing that endocannibalism could also be a formalisation of justice and not only a ritual of appeasement to one's ancestors.

CONCLUSION

The question of anthropophagia is fascinating because it is one of the phobias of the Western World in their encounters with exotic societies. It attributes three causes to cannibalism: necessity, greed and superstition. The regression of this practice can be explained, according to Deniker, simply by the fact that "Ever expanding civilisation makes it decrease." (Deniker, 1900: 27) The diachronic dimension appears important since anthropophagia would be an atavism inherited from our prehistoric ancestors: "A certain number of isolated cases of anthropophagia in Europe, in a civilised environment, without nutritional need, allow us to regard these facts as of atavistic origin, exactly like the teratological persistence of cannibalism among our primitive ancestors." (Bordier, 1888: 71) This would still be present then (in the XIXth century) among the most primitive populations. But the first paradox of cannibalism is that the anthropologists' scientific interest in it developed at the precise moment when it was disappearing, and it seems that before the XIXth century, the western world had lost even the remotest memory of it (Green, 1972).

For the anthropologist today, the problem that remains is how to interpret cannibalism, when nutritional reasons are excluded. Even this exclusion, however, is not so obvious today, since while allowing for the anecdotal nature of reports, or the legitimacy which it can have accorded to the colonial process, there is a revived interest in anthropophagia among the anthro-ecologists, who are establishing hypotheses of nutritional cannibalism, which Paul Deschamps had already constructed in 1925, around the terms of “want”, “famine” and “human raising”. Ortiz de Montellano (1978) and Marvin Harris (1979) justified it as an appropriate nutritional strategy in the face of lack of animal protein. Dornstreich and Morren (1974) follow the same reasoning when they explain, for instance, that in medium populated areas of New Guinea, the consumption of 10 adults a year by a group of some hundred individuals would compensate for the protein obtained from a whole herd of pigs.

In fact, the problem certainly resides in the symbolic aspects of the phenomenon, which concern not only western points of view, but also the way we look at “others”. Already Jean de Léry in his *Voyage fait au Brésil*, or Michel de Montaigne in his *Essais*, use the category “cannibal” to shed light on the social logic in position in their own country at that time (Lestringant, 1994). A recent volume of African stories concerning cannibalism illustrates this point of view. Collected from parents or grandparents, these cannibal stories can surprise us today. They reveal a disquieting universe, already described in other terms by different observers (travellers or missionaries), people who found themselves in these cultures as “outsiders”. Here, the authors give us an “emic” aspect, that is, as seen from the inside. The Africans tell us African cannibal stories in which the “hunted” are always the narrators, the “cannibals” being the “others”; this takes up the concept of the “other” as an acceptable but phantasmagorical⁶ category. These stories might have the structure of tales, but we also know that the tale possesses some virtues, particularly that of being spiritual explorations and also warnings (Bettelheim, 1976). In any case, these tales surely express a certain universality of fear in the face of anthropophagia, the fear of being eaten. Europe also has had its ogres, its werewolves and its ghouls. But the difference in the tales we mention here is that there are no specifically supernatural beings. They are simply humans, and one never

knows who is a cannibal and who is not. Here we have cannibals motivated by greed or pleasure. In other words, a disquieting vision of the world.

We have seen that for the anthropologists of the XIXth century, two theories were in opposition. The first one suggested cannibalism as a necessary stage, common to the development of all human societies, although they failed to demonstrate this scientifically. The second theory explained all social phenomena through religion, without telling us why certain societies were cannibalistic and others were not.

In a famous article, "Table manners, bed manners and manners of language," Jean Pouillon (1972), analysing Freud's writings on the matter, shows the relativism of the prohibition of incest and cannibalism: he indicates that the first is generally justified and often violated, whereas the second is not justified, but respected (Pouillon 1972). Obviously here the interpretation is ethnocentric: our societies have to judge affairs of incest more often than cases of cannibalism. Thus, human flesh (which we never call human "meat") would be, in our culture at least, more of an object of desire than an object of want.

If cannibalism is further distanced from us than incest, it is because it's a stranger to us. "We have talked about love. It is hard to switch from people who make love to people who eat each other," wrote Voltaire in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1994). However, incest prohibition is common to humanity, while cannibalism is not. The prohibition of incest (actually of incestuous marriage, not the incestuous sexual act) is a mark of culture, just as the "cooked". But that is not of the case for cannibalism (its prescription or prohibition have the same cultural status). After all, what anthropologists said about anthropophagia reflected their own representation of the world and not that of reality; they were first influenced by the extravagant tales of travellers, then by the moralizing discourse of missionaries, just as African oral tradition expressed collective anxieties. Thus, in this view, numerous cannibal populations would have perpetrated uncontrolled anthropophagia, eating, almost randomly, any parent or enemy. However, certain anthropologists understood the difference and placed the accent on the ritual aspect of cannibalism. As for marriage, where a group can practise exclusively either endogamy or exogamy, anthropophagia is structured. Its practice and rituals reflect the group's cosmogony. This is why one cannot at

the same time practice exo- and endo-cannibalism, as some authors claimed. (*Cf.* for example Jehan de Saint-Clavien, 1853) In so called “societies with progressive personality enrichment” one goes from the inferior status of adolescent to adult status, then to old, and then sometimes to that of ancestor: death appears then as a necessary step in the ascending progression of man. The ancestor is respected and his body, then associated with indestructible power, must remain within the group, thus justifying endocannibalism. On the other hand, in so-called “warring societies”, the adolescent warrior’s dream of a perfect death is the one found in the course of valiant fighting, since only the warrior who dies in combat can be elevated to consecrated immortal status; if he escapes death, his status will decrease with age (Bastide, 1970). These societies have a pronounced tendency to value bodily strength and the power of hedonism. In order to take the vital strength of the enemy and increase their own power, individuals of these societies will be more easily prone to exocannibalism. Thus, as opposed to incest, cannibalism, because it possesses rituals, is integrated into the cosmos.

Finally, we can speculate on which is closer to the “savage”: the Yanomami who eats his dead ancestor; or the Marind who eats an enemy, aiming at cosmic harmony; or the Westerner who invents industrialised warfare ranging from nuclear bombs to anti-personnel mines, for the gain of political or economic power, yet who is overtaken by violent nausea at the very idea of eating flesh from his own species. In essence, this means that each society believes itself to be the most developed in existence, and that outside its boundaries, only chaos reigns. According to Jean Pouillon (1972), the existence and perpetuation of a culture determines who its members are. But, while we may define our own culture in terms of the difference between ourselves and others, we still do not accept the principle of symmetrical relations between cultures.

NOTES

1. Anthropophagia: the eating of human flesh. Cannibal (comes from *cariba* Caribbean): it is said of an animal that takes nourishment from the flesh of an animal of the same species.
2. According to Juvenal, the Egyptians reported that the Tintirites had eaten an enemy that had fallen into their hands.
3. 49 articles are concerned with anthropophagy in the BMASP between 1859 and 1899; 11 in the *Revue d'Anthropologie* between 1890 and 1909.
4. And after the evolutionist classifications of the end of the XIXth century, anthropologists would suggest new scales of values, starting from an "ecological" vision of cannibalism towards a much more culturalist and symbolic perception.
5. The presentation of the diversity of forms defined by anthropology would often be a subject of voyeurism under the cover of surprise. (Cf: Villeneuve, 1979; Monestier, 2000)
6. Arens questions the very existence of anthropophagy, which could simply be a phantasm. "The significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes that others do so." (Arens, 1979: 139). This position was criticised as "revisionist" by Abler (1980) and Forsyth on the face of facts, and ideologically by Vidal-Naquet, 1987. In any case it does not take into account the most tangible facts (for example Glasse, 1963).

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