Meat: Between Ritual and Gastronomy

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ABSTRACT

Tribes of certain areas of Africa regard meat eating as an important part of their diet. However, the rules governing this are complex and strict. Different meats have different values and roles. The social, ritualistic and symbolic aspects of meat eating are here explored, together with implied undertones of ritual sacrifice and cannibalism, among other aspects.

EXAMPLES FROM AFRICA

The San and Pygmy hunter-gatherers represent some of the best-known carnivorous societies in Africa, although behaviour with strong symbolical associations in relation to meat can be observed even in agricultural societies.

* With the collaboration of Valerie de Garine.
The danger of meat

A preference for meat can be found everywhere, but not all meats are palatable, or even edible for a self-respecting human being. Among the Masa and the Muzey of Cameroon, this is so in the case of the flesh of dogs, crows, donkeys and kites. Their meat is considered bitter. Here, it is worth mentioning that the range of animals consumed by Masa and Muzey children is broader than that of adults, and may include “junk” foods such as insects or amphibians, which are considered to be too dirty to be eaten by status-conscious adults. Their consumption is considered disgusting or ridiculous, though not perilous.

However, meat is a dangerous food for both material and symbolic reasons. Animal protein has the property of rotting rapidly, especially in societies where the climate is hot and where appropriate preservation techniques are not available. The edibility of meat varies according to its level of decay in different societies. (We could mention here the maturation of meat and the hanging of game in our own society.) For example, the Masa and Muzey have nine different terms to designate the various degrees of freshness of food (Garine, I., 1997: 205). The first term refers to meat which is “so fresh that it may cause nausea”; the second refers to fresh food just ready to eat (the French say “à point”). Then come four terms corresponding to various stages of decay, but which do not preclude human consumption. The last two refer to advanced rotting and carrion. The acceptability range of meats is broader than in our Western societies. However, Masa and Muzey are aware of the health risks (gastric trouble incurred by ingesting “over-ripe” meat) and one might raise the hypothesis that the prohibition preventing small children from consuming animal protein is based on this awareness.

For the Masa and Muzey, most meats are said to be “hot”: they belong to the category of foods which are palatable by themselves. “They can be eaten without adding salt. They are so pleasurable that people gorge on them”, which can result in diarrhoea.

Symbolically, the meat of totem animals is affected by food taboos of varying intensity according to the society involved. Everywhere, meat is at risk of being polluted. The subject has been abundantly described (for instance by Douglas, 1971) and I shall not consider it at length here. This aspect cannot be dealt with in general terms; each society has its
own concepts. For example, among the Masa and Muzey, flesh can carry three different kinds of pollution. (i) “Yaona”. This term refers to the breaking of a customary prohibition or the performance of an action which is contrary to what is considered natural, for instance, a male goat attempting to mate with a ewe, or a herder copulating with cattle. The meat is considered improper for consumption except by the son of the owner’s sister (nephew), who acts as the traditional garbage disposal for his mother’s brother. (ii) “Tokora” pollution, resulting from killing a dangerous animal or a man. (iii) “Ndagara”, which refers to physical and symbolic contact with what is related to death and funerals. For instance, the meat of animals slaughtered on these ritual occasions.

Even if not polluted, meat should not be handled carelessly. Some meats are too “strong”, too loaded with magical power to be ingested by everyone. Sometimes the venison of large game, animals which have been exposed to evil powers at work in the wild bush, is forbidden for magically vulnerable individuals, such as pregnant or lactating mothers, or young children. A person has to be sufficiently armoured magically (“blindé”) to be considered mature enough to consume certain animal species. This is the case with the Gabonese puff adder (*Bitis gabonica*) in Southern Cameroon, which is reserved only for the village chief and elders.

**Carving and sharing**

We shall not elaborate on sharing meat and game, described at length by, for instance, Altman (1987: 134-146); Bahuchet (1985: 359-375); Lee (1979: 240), and Robbe (1994: 275-285).

The rules of sharing tend to favour the privileged individual: categories such as elderly men (Lee, *ibid.*), the direct ascendant, the brother’s mother, the father’s sister, and the in-laws. Each society has its own system, but in most cases the hunter is not favoured, although he may receive special parts of the animal, such as the head (among the Masa). He seldom receives the lion’s share of his quarry and may even be forbidden any part of it, as is the case among the Aka Pygmies (Bahuchet, 1985: 375). This results in a kind of mutual insurance system, entitling him to a share of meat from other hunters even if he comes back empty-handed.
Even when carving is a crude operation, as among the Pygmies, all parts of the animal are not equivalent, and this is not simply a matter of palatability. The heart, the liver and the head often receive preferential treatment. Among the Masa and Muzey, the liver, especially the pointed lobe (“the male liver”) is the favourite ritual offering. This is also the case for blood that is shed, which may be used to soak altar amulets or simply constitute an offering, a privileged fuel, for supernatural beings.

The physical state of meat is also an important consideration, and here it is tempting to refer to Lévi-Strauss’ “Culinary Triangle” (1965). In the savannah groups we have studied, raw meat may be perilous. It is bloody and may attract dangerous powers. However, meat which has been barbecued or grilled is not considered serious food, not totally civilised. It is mainly consumed outside the home, in the bush or at the market place. The Muzey consider it rather dangerous to ingest it during ritual offerings, where it is the privilege of small children, who are pure and still close to the powers of the hereafter. The authentic, civilised and serious family foodstuff is stewed meat, mostly consumed as a relish.

**MEAT AND PRESTIGE IN AFRICAN SAVANNAH POPULATIONS**

The Koma, who live on the Alantika mountains in North Cameroon, display an unexpected attitude towards meat. Although they raise cattle, they only consume 12 grams of meat per capita per day, which represents 1.2% of their total food weight (Koppert, 1981; Koppert et al., 1996: 244). They appreciate game meat, which has become scarce. They reject the meat of goats and sheep, believed to cause itchy skin, and chicken which is considered a disgusting animal. On the other hand, cattle meat is highly valued and its slaughter constitutes the central episode of the main ritual, “the cow dance”. It is an important event at family and community level. Cattle slaughter, and the meat sharing involved in this, enhance the prestige of the head of the household and allow him to rise on the scale of male society (Garine, I. de, 1996: 209). Obtaining recognition and prestige by offering meat on ritual and profane occasions is a universal feature, it demonstrates wealth and generosity.
In Senegal, among the Serer of the Baol region, upon the burial of a wealthy and respected head of family, the members of his age group wishing to honour him announce publicly the amount of cattle they are planning to donate in his memory. A few days later, during a special ritual, a number of these animals are slaughtered and their meat ceremonially distributed to family members and others who attend, enhancing the prestige both of the deceased and of those who offer the sacrificed animals (Garine, I. de, 1962: 260).

Meat among the plains populations of Northern Cameroon (Masa, Muzey, Tupuri)

These three groups are found on the flooded savannah of North Cameroon and South-West Chad, close to the Logone river. They practise a mixed economy: farming, fishing and raising cattle, sheep, goats and chickens. They also do some small game hunting. However, the meat is seldom consumed.

Preference and prestige

Meat is a highly prized food, both in terms of palatability and prestige. It is mostly served as a relish to accompany the main cereal food. Like the staple, it rates high among preferences. It is offered to a guest to demonstrate the host’s wealth, generosity, luck in hunting or herding, and even the support he receives from supernatural powers. Like our “daily bread”, it bears the highest symbolic value among foods. Mention could be made of the weekly festive consumption of meat in Christian cultures, the “Sunday joint” in the UK and, in South-West France, the “poule au pot” – the fowl which good King Henri IV wanted each of his peasants to be able to put into the pot on Sundays.

Oral literature often refers to meat in terms of gastronomy, a highly enjoyable food, especially if it is fat or “mulu”. In Masa vocabulary, “ti funa”, “eating the sorghum cake”, means living; but to lead a good life is “ti mulu”, “eating fat stuff”. At the annual festival of the Muzey clan of Pe, a leading female participant covers her head with the fat of the peritoneum of a goat
sacrificed to the clan’s protecting spirit, parading around to symbolise the flourishing prosperity of the kinship group.

Among the Masa, the “guru” custom requires the young men (the “gurna”) of the village to go into the bush and live with the cattle herd, drinking its milk and consuming abundant sorghum porridge in order to become fat and beautiful, impersonating the well-being of the whole community. Here, meat is also a prized food; and stealing neighbouring tribes’ cattle in order to consume their flesh in gluttonous and derisive ways marks their own tribal domination. The songs composed by participants in the guru fattening sessions to boast to others often refer to milk and meat: “We, the gurna of Nuldayna, we drink milk and eat meat. You from the Bangana, you only graze your cattle on the grass of the bush”. Gluttony is displayed conspicuously by the gurna, who have ritual access to the meat of the cattle slaughtered during the funeral of a powerful individual. It is a symbolically dangerous victual, which they may devour violently, and often still raw.

On gluttony

Meat arouses greed. We witnessed among the Muzey an attempt at witchcraft carried out by an old man to make the head of a household die, in order to feast on the meat which would be offered at the funeral. This was not his first attempt to obtain meat galore!

Voraciousness for meat is socially repressed. Songs are composed by participants in the guru in order to stigmatise and mock those who manifest an excessive greed for meat. They may refer to “that girl who is so crazy for meat that she did not hesitate to prostitute herself to obtain it”, or it may be about “that wife who was gluttonous enough to have eaten a whole cow’s head, bought by her husband at the market, by herself”.

In the oral literature, many episodes refer to characters seeking meat and covertly attempting to devour each other. The hyena wants to eat the male goat, the cat the pigeon. The central plot is “who is going to devour whom?” An important character is an evil, selfish and obese glutton (“Hlo” among the Masa, “Kada” among the Muzey), who constantly attempts to fill himself with meat and is chastised for it. One example will suffice: “A
wealthy man offers a castrated male goat to the person who will agree to accompany him to his grave. Our glutton accepts, resulting in his being buried alive”.

The prestige and noxiousness of game

Among the Muzey, game meat is highly prized. This population used to hunt very actively thirty years ago when large animals were still available. Today they still hunt on foot and horseback, mostly in collective hunts that assemble hundreds of hunters from neighbouring communities and set fire to a common hunting ground to flush out the game.

The Muzey make a distinction between various categories of wild animals. (i) Those that are small but can sting. (ii) Those that are small and can be killed without risk: birds, rodents, small mammals of all kinds, frogs, reptiles and insects (especially grasshoppers and termites). These are common game to be obtained freely. (iii) Large animals that can be killed without any magical threat – excepting clan totems such as the oribi (*Ourebia Ouribi*) for the Bugudum clan or the red-fronted gazelle (*Gazella rufifrons*) for the Holom clan. All other antelopes are fair prey, such as the kob (*Kobus kob*), the bontebok (*Damaliscus korrigum*) or, more modestly, the grey duiker (*Cephalophus grimmia*). (iv) Dangerous animals: elephants, hippopotamus, lions, leopards, buffaloes, roan antelopes (*Hippotragus equinus*), eland (*Tragelaphus oryx*) and wart hog (*Phacochoerus aethiopicus*). These animals are considered to be like human beings, in that they have a soul (“ngusta”) which can come back and torment the hunter, causing a specific sickness, “tokora”, and impede future success in hunting. The hunter has to undergo a purification ritual. He goes to the bush and has to pass through a particular vine (*Cissus rufescens*) split in half, upon which he symbolically leaves his pollution. Killing these dangerous animals is considered a feat and allows the hunter, when the time comes, to have his grave decorated with stakes of hardwood trees, thus displaying for ever his bravery to the passer-by.

We shall not deal here with the intricate rituals relating to game meat that involve the participation of the traditional religious authorities.
**Hunger foods**

The bravery of men at hunting and at war is praised by individual refrains ("tora"), which can also be played on whistles. They proclaim the arrival of a brave man, when he attends a funeral or returns from hunting: “My name is Corporal, he who kills animals for his father!”, “When I return from my hunt, my mother waits to receive the meat in her lap, my father rushes towards me [to receive the meat]”.

It should be noted that among the Masa and Muzey, meat sharing is always a violent episode. Snatching his quarry from a hunter is a valued feat and may lead to bloodshed during collective hunts. Even when ritually-slaughtered cattle meat is divided, altercations may arise between the participants over the allotment. Wounds which result when carving large game do not elicit revenge, they are considered normal incidents.

**The social function of meat**

Consumption of the meat of domestic animals is a counterpoint to all social events, especially those of the family cycle (births, weddings, christenings, burials). They have a ritual function. They also display the wealth and hospitality of the host. It is only during a visit that “profane” meat consumption can be observed, the size of the slaughtered animal reflecting the consideration the host has for his guest. Offering meat is an expression of joy; a guest is not only treated to meat, but is also given a piece of it to take home. In order of prestige, the animals offered are cattle, sheep, goats and chickens. The first are only offered on ceremonial occasions, mainly burials. The social standing of the deceased is assessed according to the number of animals slaughtered for his burial.

Among the Muzey, a castrated male goat is the most highly prized animal to be offered to a visitor, especially to the in-laws. A husband has to keep his father-in-law and more especially his mother-in-law satisfied or they may magically prevent their daughter from giving birth. Social visits, births and especially funerals are occasions to satiate the in-laws with the fat meat of castrated animals. Upon the death of his father- or mother-in-law, a son-in-law is expected to bring a head of cattle, or an equivalent sum in cash, to the funeral. Failing this, the in-laws may
retain his wife until he fulfils his obligation. This gift is called “bakna”, “the skin”. Conversely, the in-laws make a gift of meat to their son-in-law when he departs. It has to be consumed outside his home for fear of introducing the contamination of the burial. Similar ritual meat exchanges operate among the Masa of the Guisey clan. Daughters married to outsiders bring flour and animals offered by their husbands on the occasion of the festival of their own clan, to be eaten during the event. They also receive a meat gift to take home to their husband’s village.

*The religious function of meat*

The flesh of domestic animals is not only used to fulfil social obligations, it is also a link with the hereafter. The Masa and Muzey keep separate in their compound certain domestic animals, sometimes merely a chicken, as a token of alliance with a supernatural being. This animal cannot be sold, although its offspring will be slaughtered to honour the deity. Among the Masa, the head of family keeps a cow consecrated to the celestial deity (Laona). It will be slaughtered at his funeral and be the seed animal for the herd he will own among the dead.

Meat offerings allow communication with all supernatural powers, deceased ancestors, deities and spirits of all kinds. Humans feel they are cornered by hungry supernatural beings that have to be constantly placated with gifts of meat from all kinds of domestic animals (except pigs and ducks, recently introduced and still outside the ritual field). The main deities have their own specifications. The water deity, Mununta, requires black-coloured animals (including dogs). The celestial god (Alaona [Masa], Lona [Muzey]), who is usually beneficial, requires white-coloured animals, especially sheep, to be strangled, as it does not appreciate bloodshed. Matna, the deity of death and evil, and Bagaona, master of the evil in the bush, demand red and tawny animals, especially goats, to be violently slaughtered, since they will gorge on the spilt blood. They are the leaders of a cohort of smaller evil deities and of human sorcerers and witches who yearn for human flesh. Some sacrificial occasions are considered to be so dangerous that the slaughtered animal must be easy to distinguish. Its
### TABLE 1

Occasions implying the consumption of meat during the food cycle of the Muzey

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throat is not cut: it is pricked with a knife; and a strip is cut from the middle of the skin to avoid it being used as a loin cloth.

As mentioned, the guardian spirits of clans or individuals determine food taboos on various animals. All spirits request at least one annual celebration. The list is an open one, as every individual during his life may experience episodes during which he has to ask for supernatural help; or he may be witness to a miracle. Two sacrifices are compulsory: a minor one to establish the link, and a major one for giving thanks. Every year at the same date a ritual will be performed to request the protection of the supernatural power in question.

All year round there are many ritual occasions when meat is eaten, and these are likely to have a perceptible influence on the diet. (See Table 1)

*Ritual meat-eating episodes*

Besides the fixed calendar for rituals, supernatural powers may ask at any time for an offering, which usually involves slaughtering an animal. They may send a dream to the person they wish to ask for a sacrifice from, or try to attract his attention by causing inconvenience, trouble or sickness, to himself, his family or his belongings. The Masa, Muzey and Tupuri possess geomantic divination systems consisting of several hundred signs standing for the categories operating in society and represented by pieces of broken pottery or stems of reeds. Meat is symbolised by a sign meaning “something found in the bush, in small or large quantities, fresh or rotten”, i.e. meat, game, dead bodies.

*Similarity between the person offering the sacrifice and the slaughtered victim*

Beside signs symbolising the various supernatural powers and the person consulting the divination system, other signs designate the offerings, and specifically the domestic animals to be slaughtered. Each of these potential victims is also represented by its blood. After a process similar to throwing dice, each sign is counted as one or two, odd or even numbered, like digits. The diagnosis is made by relating the signs which have the same digits. The signs of the demanding supernatural being are compared with those
representing the petitioner; a victim is sought among the animals. There is a symbolic similarity between the person offering the sacrifice and the slaughtered animal; sacrificing an animal whose blood has the same digit as the petitioner would be equivalent symbolically to killing him also. This is the first instance in which we encounter symbolic homology between a human and the animal he is offering to slaughter, both made of flesh, so that the requesting deity is identified as well as the animal. The side on which the slain chicken falls will determine whether the sacrifice is accepted or not. For a male deity, it should fall with its right side up; for a female deity, with the left side up. In most cases a specific person butchers the animal. For example, in the case of a sacrifice to the traditional earth priest, for an ordinary person here again it would be his sister’s son since he is considered immune to the pollution which might affect his maternal uncle.

Blood is sometimes intentionally shed to please the most dangerous power, the deity of evil and death. In all cases, small pieces of raw liver are offered to the spirits. The liver itself is often grilled and consumed by small children, who are not at risk. The rest of the meat is cut into pieces and stewed; it will accompany the sorghum staple. Portions of the cooked food will in turn be offered to the supernatural powers: “My deceased father (or god), here is your sorghum porridge and its meat relish. Come and eat. Give us a good crop, numerous children, etc…” By conforming to the diagnosis of the diviner, the inconveniences may stop. If this is not the case, the process is repeated a few times. If everything goes wrong, the person in trouble may undergo a psychopathological crisis. He may join a possession group (or “college”), to be cured by its leaders and end up by naming and being possessed by the demanding deity. From then on he will regularly slaughter animals for his protector and will also act as an intermediary between the supernatural power and other individuals molested by the same deity. In the process he will take part in the rituals of the petitioners and generously partake of the meat of the slaughtered animals. The possession groups, “su fulina” (“the people of the spirits”), have a leader, the “sa billa” (“the man with the throwing knife”). They have to obey his orders when asked to perform the slaughtering of animals for their protecting deity and have constant access to the meat of the sacrificed animals. Apart from rituals pertaining to each possession college, the possessed are welcomed to most other rituals. They are believed to be
symbolically “ridden” by the deity they impersonate. They act like decoys, guaranteeing the attendance of supernatural powers during ceremonies and the acceptance of the offerings made to them.

The annual commemoration of each clan and of its guardian spirits (Vuntilla, “the beginning of the moon”) is marked by impressive slaughters. For instance, among the Muzey, the feast in honour of Ful Mugudugu, the python spirit protecting the Djarao clan, involves sacrificing 50 chickens and 30 goats. The members of the corresponding group gorge on meat and express their appreciation to the college chief. To maintain his prestige he constantly needs to treat those attending his rituals to plentiful meat. They compose songs to praise him and his wealth: “Our chief is not a poor man. He has chickens at home. He has goats at home. He has cattle at home. Our father, Koya, he is that way! The drum beats and he catches me a chicken, he catches me a goat, he catches me a cow!”

The same songs of praise operate among the Masa in Bugudum: “What is this violent wind blowing? It is Béré, (the protector of the clan of Duma), the chief of the millet beer, the master of the meat, who is among us”.

In addition to the rituals concerning the community, some social events connected to the participants’ families imply presenting a new wife or a new baby to the association chief. This ceremony is called “entering”, bringing chickens and goats which will ultimately be slaughtered and eaten ritually. The members of the possession clubs consume a much higher quantity of meat than the rest of the population. Disregarding the ritual pretext, possession associations act in reality like gastronomic clubs. A group recruits its members among people who are slightly marginalized because of psychopathological problems, but also old ladies (usually menopausal) with no further duties to perform in society.

Possession delineates a field that is special in terms of time and space, something like a sacred domain within which the participants can behave differently from those in ordinary life. For instance, they display their craving for meat in a very conspicuous and vulgar way, which is contrary to the restraint with which food is handled in normal life. This disorder and brutality is reminiscent of the Bacchantes in Greek Antiquity, who tore apart live kids with their bare hands (sparagmos) and devoured the raw flesh (omophagia) (Bourlet 1983: 35).
Searching for the appropriate offering through the system of divination suggests that there may be a symbolic equivalence between the person who consults divination and the animal slaughtered to placate the supernatural wrongdoer. As mentioned, if the animal has the same symbolic number as the person making the offering, it should not be slaughtered for fear of killing the petitioner. This equivalence appears also in the archetypal sacrifices of European civilisation, for example the sacrifices of Iphigenia and Abraham. In both cases, at the last minute the human being is replaced by an animal, a doe instead of Iphigenia in order to obtain the destruction of Troy (according to Euripides’ happy ending), a ram instead of Abraham’s son to obtain the defeat of Israel’s enemies (Bloch 1992).

Among the plains populations of Northern Cameroon, people who have experienced trouble with specific supernatural powers or who have invoked them, need to exchange their body (which has been symbolically held for ransom) with that of an animal which will be consecrated, slaughtered and consumed. The sufferer “exchanges his body”, on the basis of an offering, with the being who has stolen his soul and symbolically eaten it. Fear of being symbolically devoured is present in most of the African societies we have studied. The imaginary world is populated with powers ready to consume you symbolically, ill-intentioned people as well as supernatural deities. It is difficult in such an uncertain field to obtain a clear explanation of the process. If the soul or the body are concerned, both aspects seem to be equivalent. All the soul eaters seem to practise symbolic cannibalism. They may even be obliged by the initiator to devour the soul of cherished close relatives in order to obtain various magical powers. Many types of black magic operate: in Southern Cameroon the “gwelli” and “ekong” of the coastal populations (Mvae, Yassa), and the “fona” in Northern Cameroon. These consist of stealing and devouring the vital principle of an individual in order to make a slave of it for personal benefit, such as working in one’s cocoa or cotton plantation. Among the Masa and Muzey there are three kinds of evil-doers: the fire women and men, the sorcerers and the sorceresses, “the people who eat”. In the oral literature, the leading supernatural man-eaters are: Matna (the deity of evil and death) and Bagaona, his assistant, corresponding to violent death in the bush. They both rejoice in blood and human flesh. They are the leaders of the
various groups of cannibals, sorcerers and wrongdoers. They come together to partake in feasts of human flesh.

_Ogres and cannibals_

Ogres are anthropophagi present in the traditional literature of most civilisations, including our own. Stegagno Piccio (1988: 123), referring to our Western world, mentions “fabulous tales populated with ogres, child eaters... a leitmotiv in the Germanic collective soul”. She refers to Tom Thumb, who ends up by making the ogre eat his own daughters, or Hansel and Gretel forced to fatten in a cage to become a witch’s meal.

Fear of symbolic cannibalism, performed by the prowling soul (doppelganger) of evil people, is a constant and concrete aspect in the daily life of the Masa and Muzey. Young men are recommended to be very careful in choosing their bride, to gather as much information about her as possible in order to avoid marrying a man-eating sorceress, who might be a temptation, as they are said to be often very attractive. One example will suffice to illustrate the point. In 1991 in the Muzey village of Domo Suluku, a woman was accused of having symbolically eaten the liver of her husband, causing his sudden death. She successfully underwent an ordeal and relived her crime shortly afterwards. She could not help it: it was in her nature. This evil condition is inherited by boys from their fathers and by girls from their mothers. Today still, small children are prevented from sleeping on their backs, which exposes their livers to the magical little red bird sent by the sorceress. A species of large bat is driven away by wild screams for the same reason.

In the district of Yagoua, a small town in Northern Cameroon, harsh arguments result almost daily from such accusations. The accused are brought in front of the traditional court. Old ladies may even be flogged to make them confess their crime. People go to jail simply for being accused of symbolic cannibalism. In former times, among the Muzey, people considered guilty of this accusation were buried alive, together with their children. Among the Mésmé, the Muzey’s southern neighbours, after the execution, the liver of the convicted person was examined in order to confirm his guilt (Garrigues, 1974: 190). This problem of symbolic cannibalism perpetuates a feeling of
insecurity even today, as nobody is very certain about what act his or her roaming soul might have done during his sleep. Each individual is legally responsible for the misdeeds of his double and could “be punished with imprisonment for from two to ten years, and with a fine of from five thousand to one hundred thousand francs.” (Article 254, Section 251 – Witchcraft, Penal Code, Republic of Cameroon, 1965, 1967: 211).

Among the forest populations of Southern Cameroon, as elsewhere, some individuals are endowed with charisma and constant success. Here this is attributed to internal symbolic power, which takes material shape in the form of a small land crab or a spider. This may come out at night through the person’s mouth in order to eat other people’s souls. To discourage this cannibalistic principle, it is necessary to mix human flesh (obtained from a corpse) with cucumber oil cake (in the case of men) or peanut oil cake (in the case of women), and smear some of this on one’s lips before going to sleep. The crab climbs to the lips, smells the odour of a human being, feels satiated and does not have to go out and create trouble to satisfy its craving.

To paraphrase Lévi-Strauss (1962: 17), in the African cultures we have discussed, it is obvious that meat “is good to eat and good to think about”, but we cannot overlook the fact that there can also be a whiff of uneasiness attached to it for fear of symbolic cannibalism.

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