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There Is no Smoke without Fire: Cannibalism, Source Criticism, and a Famous Anthropological Controversy

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In three books published a few years ago, the French anthropologist Georges Guille-Escuret undertakes a particularly ambitious task: he intends to provide a global picture of the practice of cannibalism1 in the world, in what he calls a 'Comparative Sociology of Cannibalism'2. For most readers, it may come as a surprise that modern Anthropology was actually never able to provide a coherent and wide-ranging scientific analysis of cannibalism. Man-eating is indeed a paradoxical object for both scientists and the public. On one hand, the theme is a constant object of fascination for the mass media. Yet, on the other hand, the scientific community seems unable to escape its many complexities, which are not only cultural or methodological but also political or ideological.

One of the main issues currently preventing significant progress in the field is the lack of credibility of a disturbing amount of the testimonies upon which the scholarly discourse about cannibalism has to rely.

This problem in particular was the starting point of a heated debate about
the reality of customary cannibalism. William Arens was the one who started
the controversy in 1979, with The Man-Eating Myth – Anthropology and
Anthropophagy:

"Excluding survival conditions, I have been unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society. Rumours, suspicions, fears and accusations abound, but no satisfactory first-hand accounts. Learned essays by professionals are unending, but the sustaining ethnography is lacking. [...] This study [...] suggests that for layman and scholar alike the idea of cannibalism exists prior to and thus independent of the evidence" 3.

The book was rightly criticized by many for its obvious shortcomings
(too aggressive, too simplistic, too restrictive). It nevertheless had a profound

1 Cannibalism is here taken as synonymous with anthropophagy and man-eating. Although we would generally prefer a much wider definition of this phenomenon, it is here restricted to its most obvious aspect for the general public and for the controversy at hand: the direct consumption, in various contexts and in different forms, of human flesh by a human being.


influence on the way anthropologists would study cannibalism from then on. It had become more than ever impossible to overlook the question of the reliability of the related ethnographic material, be it to dismiss the problem as a whole or to address it in one way or another. One could therefore have expected that source criticism would have been at the heart of the debate, but most studies would unfortunately prove a far cry from models of sound methodology for dealing with historical documents.

From an outsider's point of view, this state of things is rather unexpected. Most, if not practically all, of the ethnographic material related to cannibalism is indeed made up of 'historical' testimonies, dating back to the sixteenth century for the oldest commonly used and to the mid-twentieth century for the most recent. What is more, it is generally admitted that, for some reason, cannibals or their practices usually 'disappear' before professionally trained ethnographers can reach them.

Some have already highlighted the unfamiliarity of many anthropologists with the methods associated with source criticism(4). This problem, however, assumes a particular significance in a debate where studies ignoring the rules of source criticism nonetheless use historical material to defend their point: cannibal customs are a real practice. As for us, we would like to show, from a purely methodological standpoint, that some of the most influential analyses of the ethnographic material have based their conclusions on poor reasoning and that it undoubtedly contributed to shape baseless understandings of past cannibal practices.

This paper intends to provide first a brief overview of the current state of the anthropological literature on cannibalism, based mainly on its attitude towards source criticism. A contextualization of the Western attitude towards the theme before and during the time of production of the earliest testimonies will follow. We will then put source criticism to the test using in particular a famous Brazilian case study.

Post-Arens anthropology of cannibalism: a brief overview

The Man-Eating Myth was welcomed with some moderate praise (in particular outside anthropology) and much criticism (in particular among anthropologists). Its legacy is nonetheless indisputable. When the book was published, complex anthropological studies devoted to cannibalism were still far from common. The new debate it generated, however, turned out to be the much-needed trigger for a renewal of scientific research on the subject(5). The field of cannibal studies rapidly went from apathetic to chaotic and different schools of thought defended their standpoints with sometimes bitter arguments. This added complexity contributed to cut off the anthropological debate from the other disciplines that might have an interest in the study of cannibalism. Consequently, Arens and his unparalleled clear-cut analysis remains today a reference outside his field when his own field largely marginalized him.

For the sake of clarity, we will now try to delineate in the anthropological literature the different kinds of approaches most relevant for our study, with a focus on their attitudes towards source criticism:

1. A number of influential studies focus primarily on interpretation and symbolism. Marshall Sahlins, who was at the forefront of the fight against Arens, is a prime example of this approach, in particular with an otherwise impressive paper about Fijian cannibalism(6); ethnographic sources are tools supplying raw information, while the accumulation of testimonies somehow self-establishes reliability.

Cannibalism, in this case, is studied like a purely cultural phenomenon and, therefore, is placed in its wider cultural context. Whether cannibalism is actually practised or not tends here to be considered as an irrelevant question: meanings and understanding are what matter. Despite the indisputable interest of that focus, this lack of concern for factual reality itself seriously weakens the conclusions reached. As Merrilee H. Salmon puts it:

'Clearly, much can be learned about the culture by trying to understand its hopes and fears on their own terms. Yet by denying the importance of the factual question, anthropologists overlook a crucial consideration for grasping the social reality they seek to understand. Evans-Pritchard, for example, knew that witches, in the sense of persons with supernatural abilities to cause harm to others, did not exist. This knowledge significantly shaped his understanding of Zande accusations of witchcraft and their explanations involving the activity of witches. If anthropologists who study cannibalism talk do not know whether or not cannibalism occurs, their ability to understand the meaning of the talk is severely limited(7).

The lack of concern for the type and quality of the evidence involved in the intellectual process of interpretation has become highly problematic in some cases. Observed facts, myths, second-hand information, local testimonies and a posteriori reconstructions tend to be mixed on apparently equal terms in the most conceptual approaches(8). In their quest for a deeper understanding of cannibalism

as a cultural trait, some authors go so far as depriving their readers of the basic elements required to assess the value of their reasoning.

2. Sceptical approaches, on the contrary, negatively assess the reliability of particular sets of ethnographic material. They deconstruct testimonies and identify inconsistencies. Balanced studies have more radical, nearly hypercritical, counterparts, but all of them share some kind of focus on source criticism. Their influence on the debate, however, is limited, because their focus is mainly local and their method is time-consuming. In comparison with Arens, who oversimplified the method to maximize his impact, what they gain in sound methodology is lost in their impact on the field of research.

3. Postcolonial approaches, for their part, postulate that cannibalism is fundamentally a discursive tool used in the interactions between Westerners (most of the time) and natives. The cannibal controversy and post-colonialism emerge at about the same time, both phenomena focusing on the potential gap between Western discourses and native realities. Yet, postcolonial scholars often overlook source criticism, even if there are famous exceptions. Their concerns lie in matters disconnected from the factual reality of native life — the actual practice of cannibalism included. Therefore, they mostly ignore problems of reliability while, in fact, they treat ethnographic discourses about cannibalism as largely unreliable material in itself — often without applying the methods that could prove it.

4. A significant part of the relevant scientific literature deals with cannibalism as part of beliefs about sorcery. Sometimes, sorcerers are said to be eaten but, most of the time, they are the invisible cannibals threatening human society. In this case, the nature of the theme of study seems to delineate by itself an attitude toward source criticism. The object itself — sorcery — reduces the need for a debate about the reality of cannibalism: anthropologists are generally convinced beforehand that actual sorcerers do not exist — and nonexistent beings normally do not eat people. Yet, these beliefs are deeply rooted as truths in many cultures and they shape views and discourses about cannibalism. There is no doubt that an imperfect understanding of these beliefs on the part of Western observers and others — sometimes prompted by the natives themselves for strategic or political reasons — gave rise to accounts of actual cannibalism that still need to be submitted to careful source criticism.

5. Finally, there exists a well-represented and explicitly ‘anti-Arens’ literature, whose objective, mainly or at least in part, is to prove that Arens was wrong in his assessment of the work of his colleagues. The strategy is simple: the authors involved gather ethnographic testimonies related to a supposedly cannibal human group and then question the reliability of that material. If it passes the test, it should suffice to demonstrate the practice of customary cannibalism in at least one case and, consequently, to prove that Arens was wrong. While excessive critical expectations are the weak point of some sceptical approaches, laxity in the treatment of the material and fundamental misuses of the methodology are an all too common characteristic of these ‘anti-Arens’ approaches.

With this categorization, we certainly do not wish to oversimplify the complex theoretical, ideological, political and methodological issues involved. This rough outline was designed only as a practical tool in order to give a picture of the dominant research trends currently available to the non-specialized student interested in the subject, with source criticism as a focus. With that in mind, it is striking to see how most anthropological studies dedicated to cannibalism either ignore source criticism or misuse it — despite a few scholars showing a more balanced approach.

It is also crucial to keep in mind that this controversy is far from being only about technical disagreements about the handling of ethnographic sources. Pro- and anti-Arens accuse each other of being ethnocentric, the first because they supposedly refuse to accept the reality of native customs incompatible to the Western mind and the latter because, on the contrary, they supposedly


give too much credit to prejudiced Western testimonies about native customs. This ideological tension probably contributed to the production of a number of studies built more around their expected conclusions than around testimonies and the coherent method that could objectively assess their reliability.

These very modern difficulties illustrate the peculiar place of cannibalism in the Western realities and imagination. There is indeed an age-old – and complex – Western relationship with man-eating that needs to be taken into account when handling historical ethnographic material. This is why a brief outline of the context of production of early modern Western testimonies about cannibalism seems necessary at this point.

A Western context for cannibalism

The history of cannibalism in the West has attracted some much-needed attention in the last decades. The early explorers of the New World had indeed preconceptions and prejudices about man-eating long before leaving Europe. Moreover, the people who received or bought their narratives in Europe at the time had their own expectations about exoticism and weird customs from beyond the seas.

Man-eating is a multi-layered reality for a man of the late fifteenth century, even before the word ‘cannibal’ itself was created. Survival cannibalism during severe food shortages has often been mentioned during the Middle Ages and later. In addition to the indisputable but limited reality of this desperate food choice, rumours and tales of man-eating abound in times of famine, and biblical as well as literary models are numerous and well-known.

The Eucharist, for its part, is supposed to be the eating, during mass, of the true flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, not metaphorically but literally: subtle theology and vivid miracle stories of bleeding hosts and bread turning to flesh were there to remind the faithful that what he consumed was really a divine morsel. What is more, Protestant polemists did not hesitate to label Catholics as cannibals because of this dogma.

Medicinal cannibalism, where body parts or fluids are ingested as medicine, has benefited of much attention lately. Mummy parts, in particular, were used as a kind of panacea in Europe well into the nineteenth century. Above all, man-eaters abound in myths, legends and in the Latin and vernacular literature. Giants, Ogres, English kings, tricked adulterous wives, crusaders, witches and many other characters filling the European imagination are sometimes said to eat humans in whole or in part.

It must therefore be taken into account that man-eating is a recurrent, sometimes almost obsessive, theme in medieval and early modern Europe. Cannibalism has many faces and it is never considered with indifference. It is associated with violent emotions: fear, disgust, hate. It challenges fundamental identity boundaries. For our early modern travellers however, man-eaters were more than this: the medieval ethnographic tradition had been constantly repeating that they were waiting on the margins of the world map. This tradition had been inherited from Ancient Greece, then reworked during the Middle Ages and was still widely circulated and influential even after it was largely proven wrong by the new discoveries. We need to consider this when we try to understand the pre-existing relationship between early modern European travellers and cannibalism.

Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C., already described a world where a string of cannibal people, some more gruesome than others, occupy the outer ring of the known world. After Herodotus, man-eaters did not change much: library ethnographers only pushed them back a bit farther to the North-East of Asia, but one could still see them, with their two thousand years old names, on late medieval illustrated world maps, chewing on human limbs.

The fourteenth century marks a crucial turning point in the history of the Western representation of the man-eater. This period saw European travellers reach India, Southeast Asia and China. The written records of their adventures, mixed with centuries of traditional ethnographic knowledge (monsters and marvels included), form the bulk of the most successful ‘geographical’ work of the late Middle Ages: the Travels of the library ethnographer John Mandeville. His work remained until the early seventeenth century an unrivalled authority (much more than Marco Polo or any authentic late medieval travellers to the East ever were).

The man-eaters of John Mandeville possess some fundamentally new characteristics compared to the traditional ones. Forget the cold and inhospitable landscapes of North-East Asia and their cannibal nomads, the new man-eaters dwell in the most remote regions of Southeast Asia, where they go naked under the tropical sun (which had been for a long time the traditional Arab view of the cannibal). Mandeville mostly borrowed the idea from the tales of real travellers, but expanded this far beyond the realm of reality, inventing numerous islands farther East where he relocated some of the traditional cannibal customs going back to Herodotus – old customs which could no longer find their place in the North. This is ethnographic imagination

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(17) V. VANDENBERG, De chair et de sang, op. cit.

(18) F. LESSERTING, Cannibals, op. cit.


(20) See, e.g., H. BLURTON, Cannibalism, op. cit.


(22) V. VANDENBERG, De chair et de sang, op. cit.


Cannibalism and source criticism: a case study

Historical material related to the issue of cannibalism presents a spectacular challenge for source criticism. The historical and cultural context stated above is indeed burdensome. Moreover, that long-standing sensitivity to the question is widely shared across cultures, with profound consequences on the way man-eating is depicted.

Quite paradoxically, cannibalism is also problematic because it appears so often in the ethnographic record. The amount of testimonies available should only matter in the sense that it raises the level of our expectations for the individual reliability of any document: when a considerable number of witnesses appear, one will expect to find among them at least a few very reliable eyewitnesses offering detailed and coherent accounts. Things, however, do not seem to work that way for cannibalism, as a quick look at some of the most influential studies dedicated to cannibalism will show.

Kannibalismus was published in 1939 by the German ethnologist Ewald Volhard, and it is still unparalleled today for the broad scope of its study. It also remains, despite its age, a good model of the gap between the usual anthropological treatment of the abundance of cannibalism-related sources and orthodox source criticism. Volhard saw something most positive in the fascination exerted by cannibalism on travellers: in his view, this strong interest ensures that not a single case of customary cannibalism can be overlooked. Any person getting any kind of information about it anywhere in the world would indeed feel the urge to report it, which he describes as ‘ein gewaltiger Vorteil anderen Kulturreisenden gegenüber’ (25). He also emphasizes the fact that, in his opinion, fear and disgust tend to prevent people from giving a detailed account of the practice, making it difficult to grasp meanings and motives. To put it briefly, people will necessarily talk about it, but not too much.

Volhard is nevertheless fully aware of the weaknesses of his abundant material: detailed accounts and eyewitnesses are lacking, the influence of the Western imagination is obvious and the fact that local people create testimonies mostly to please those asking the questions is a matter of concern. Testimonies, he says, tend to be inaccurate and the best of them are not always reliable (‘Aber auch diese wenigen sind keineswegs immer zuverlässig’ (26)). Volhard’s worries, however, only apply to the anthropologist’s ability to establish the meanings and motives behind the practice: the reality of the practice itself and of its extent is established without a doubt by the number of times it appears in the record. The German scholar sees classification and organization of the material as the key to transcending its weaknesses and make up for the lack of information readily available for interpretation (27).

Numbers first, then the amount of details and, finally, the reliability of independent sources: such are, in order of precedence, the criteria taken into consideration by Volhard for using historical and ethnographic material. From the amount of material, one could draw a map where all the cannibals in the world would be located (28). The anthropologist’s intellectual intervention will somehow compensate the lack of details, and sometimes the lack of reliability. Volhard uses à la carte source criticism: reliability is therefore, for the most part, arbitrarily established.

This reasoning is a common feature of the anthropological literature: numerous unreliable sources would spontaneously generate a cumulated level of reliability (like how fractions add up in mathematics). A sound use of source criticism, however, would be unaffected by the accumulation of material. Quite the contrary. In fact, for the sake of objectivity, we could even address unreliability as if it was an infectious disease. The more unreliable sources there are, the less the whole material would seem usable.

The infamous ‘no smoke without fire’ rule is intimately associated with this mistaken law of accumulation, as we will see now. Another milestone in the history of the anthropological treatment of cannibalism proves that the problem of the reliability of the cannibalism-related material was troubling anthropologists long before Arens released his pamphlet.

In a paper first published in 1960, Edward Evans-Pritchard studied the cannibalism of the Azande (or Niam-Niam) from Central Africa (29). He systematically analysed the main texts supposedly establishing the reality of Zande cannibalism. None really managed to survive his careful inquiry: in his view, they rely far too much on hearsay, the authors do not know precisely which ethnic group they are referring to or do not spend enough time in the region to be of any interest. He applied the most rigorous source criticism to his whole material with great intelligence. His conclusions, however, came as a surprise:

‘Now, I think that no one will deny that the evidence of the travellers, each considered independently, ranges from the dubious to

(26) Ibid., p. 368-370.
(27) Ibid., p. 368.
the worthless; but there is no smoke without fire, and taking all the evidence together we may conclude that there is a strong probability that cannibalism was practised by at any rate some Azande (30).

Source criticism, in this case, was leading the anthropologist into what could have seemed like a dead end; as abundant as it is, an unreliable material would have to be dismissed. It would not necessarily mean that the Azande did not practise cannibalism, but it would imply that there is no convincing proof enabling one to assert reasonably that they did. This logical thought process suddenly took another direction with the help of ‘common sense’ in the form of the ‘no smoke without fire’ rule, which artificially created a new balance in the understanding of Zande cannibalism. The proof via selective accumulation was thus legitimated and Evans-Pritchard was able to establish his view of the matter at hand: cannibalism had indeed been practised, but on a very limited scale, and probably not by the ‘true’ Azande but by foreign elements in the society (31).

Postcolonial scholars would obviously question a conclusion reproducing common stereotypes about the ‘foreign cannibal’. From a methodological standpoint, moreover, using the unsceptical ‘no smoke without fire’ argument amounts to pure speculation. There is no point to source criticism if, in the end, only the instincts and skills of the anthropologist are able to assess what is reliable and what is not. Evans-Pritchard clearly switched methods halfway through his paper, which we defined earlier as source criticism à la carte. The foundations of the argument are understood, but their consequences are denied in favour of an absurd conclusion: if the material is unreliable, the anthropologist’s instincts will take the lead.

Both previous examples illustrate incomplete uses of source criticism in anthropology as well as repeated recourse to subjectivity and unsceptical common sense. As we will see, these shortcomings were meant to last and to further develop in response to Arens. The famous Tupinamba case is a remarkable example of this.

The cannibalism of the Brazilian Tupinamba and its reality have been discussed at length, most notably based on Hans Staden’s account of captivity among them, published for the first time in German in 1557. Scholars, however, are still engaged in an endless debate about the reliability of this testimony (32). In order to avoid this hurdle, most (33) would then turn to Donald Forsyth’s study supposedly establishing the reality of Tupinamba cannibalism based on reliable independent sixteenth-century Jesuit testimonies (34). Forsyth introduces his paper like this: ‘The Jesuit accounts are full of descriptions of this practice [cannibalism] … In view of Arens’ denial of Tupinamba cannibalism, the Jesuit sources are doubly significant (35). This is undoubtedly a promising start, even more so because Forsyth himself has carefully selected the most significant extracts and has reproduced them in translation in his paper: ‘I have translated what I consider to be the most important passages’ (36).

Quite strangely, out of the twenty-five quotes available, more than ten are completely unrelated to cannibalism. Forsyth, in fact, used this opportunity to demonstrate the wider interest of the Jesuit accounts for all aspects of local life and customs. While interesting, this approach has already reduced our corpus of texts: this leaves us with only fourteen of the best sixteenth-century Jesuit testimonies about Brazilian cannibalism to chew on.

Forsyth intends, in his analysis, to take into account the time each Jesuit spent in Brazil, their characters and, as much as possible, their prejudices. The context, therefore, will take into account and the obvious lack of objectivity of some authors is highlighted.

The fourteen quotations related to cannibalism come from twelve different sources produced by eight different reliable authors between 1549 and 1591; this is a substantial body of material over a forty-year timespan. Four texts are reports or treatises and eight are letters, most of them of the formal kind. Only three letters by two different authors (Anchieta and Navarro) unequivocally contain accounts of their authors’ personal experiences on the field. The aims of most of the texts making up the body of evidence assembled by Forsyth is to give people in Europe some general information about Brazilian natives and their customs, mostly often with a tendency to give priority to anecdotal material. Most of the time, it is impossible to establish whether the cannibalism-related information given by these sources comes from.

This is supposed to be the best material available, so we naturally expect a certain level of detail in the narrative of the Jesuits. Establishing what should be considered a ‘substantial’ level of detail in a given context can obviously be a tricky issue. In this case, however, we face no such problem: The Jesuit witnesses describing Brazil to their European contemporaries in fact rarely ‘describe’ cannibalism. Most of the time, they only mention it in passing: ‘They return to eat them at a great feast’, ‘all of them eat human flesh’, ‘under no circumstances do they eat human flesh’, ‘all of those on the coast who have the same language eat human flesh, even though some never eat it and have a great abhorrence of it’, etc. These general assertions are typical of third-hand information or ‘common knowledge’; personal experience is impossible to prove. With cannibalism being a common stereotype of otherness in the European tradition, it would be unwise to give too much credit to such testimonies lacking any reference to personal experience, whoever the author may be.

When, on the contrary, testimonies are detailed, comparisons between them could lead to a hierarchy in terms of levels of reliability. In this case, at least five different Jesuits recount a famous rite, here reduced to its most important elements: a prisoner is brought into a village, then he is fed and

(30) Ibid., p. 251.
(31) Ibid., p. 254.
(34) D. FORSYTH, ‘The Beginnings of Brazilian Anthropology’, op. cit.
(35) Ibid., p. 150.
(36) Ibid., p. 155.
panpered for weeks and he can even be given a wife. Afterwards, family and allies from neighboring villages gather for days of festivities and the prisoner is finally executed before being butchered. Some of the available sources mention cannibalism at two different stages of this process: the children that the prisoner might have had with a local woman are eaten and the prisoner is himself eaten after his execution. If we carefully read the available accounts, however, some significant discrepancies appear:

1. Nobrega (1549, in a letter): the children are eaten, but no mention of the final cannibalism. (39)
2. Nobrega (1549, in a report): final cannibalism, but no mention of the children being eaten. (40)
3. Correia: final cannibalism and children eaten (the boys, always; the girls, rarely). (41)
4. Cardim: no mention of final cannibalism and no mention of the children being eaten. (42)
5. Soares: final cannibalism, but no mention of the children being eaten. (43)

Forsth, unfortunately, seems to ignore these differences. He even introduces Cardim’s description of the rite — which is a lengthy and incredibly detailed account of the whole process, including clothes and attitudes — as ‘one of the most detailed accounts we have of the cannibalistic rites of the Tupinamba’ (44). It is fascinating to note that this particular account is the only one where cannibalism, in fact, is not mentioned at all.

These accounts, moreover, also differ by their nature. The two different accounts by Nobrega are short and rough sketches mixed with other irrelevant information. Correia’s account is much more detailed, but he seems to focus on some aspects (the difference between the boys and the girls born of the prisoner) and just mentions others without any detail (final cannibalism). Cardim’s long, detailed and coherent testimony is by far the most impressive. This is the only case where the last phase of the rite — the butchering — is really described. Finally, Soares, who may have read Cardim (45), adds a few original descriptions, much shorter, however. None of these authors, alas, implies that he personally saw the whole thing happen. Yet, Cardim, even if he is not the earliest witness, is without a doubt the closest we can get to an eyewitness account since he offers detailed and coherent information often unavailable elsewhere. Of the five testimonies as they appear in Forsyth’s paper, Cardim’s should quite clearly have been given priority when the place of cannibalism in the Tupinamba sacrifice was questioned.

As regards the butchering, Cardim is the only one who describes precisely how the victim is cut up, how the morsels are distributed among the spectators and why some of it is cooked (in order for those coming from far away to be able to take it back home). But he does not say what is done with the flesh. If we look at Cardim’s whole text, moreover, there is no sign of restraining in it: the butchering as he depicts it is bloody enough. Therefore, we certainly cannot conjecture that he voluntarily avoided mentioning the ‘horror’ of cannibalism.

Is the rite as Cardim describes it coherent? Can this process really work if cannibalism is not there to make it whole? Hypothetically, the Jesuits themselves could have faced the same question. We cannot exclude that most of them considered that cannibalism was a necessary and logical ending to the rite. Some cross-cultural comparison, however, might shed light on that issue.

In this case, some eighteenth-century accounts of cultural practices in Burma and India contain descriptions of rites surprisingly similar to those of the Tupinamba. (46). At the end of those ritual sacrifices, the executed prisoner is butchered and the morsels are distributed, like in Brazil. Sometimes bits are even cooked for those travelling far away. There is no cannibalism in this case, however: the flesh is finally buried. Its purpose was clearly not to be eaten. This does not mean, of course, that the ending had to be the same in Brazil. It just proves that cannibalism is not a necessary ending for rituals of that kind and that the most detailed account for Brazil mentioned in Forsyth’s paper, which is the only one leaving out man-eating, does not suffer from any problem of internal coherence.

Recently, Franz Obermeier (47) also tried to demonstrate the reality of the Tupinamba ‘cannibal rite’. In his attempt, he made careful comparisons of Portuguese, French and German material. He even managed to demonstrate the reality of the rite itself by successfully comparing independent accounts of each phase of the process. However, he strangely failed to apply his method of comparison to the last and most controversial phase of the process, precisely where cannibalism is supposed to appear. He nonetheless concluded that his study proved that the Tupinamba were indeed cannibals. A stunning result, to say the least, since he did not really write a word about man-eating except in the title of his paper. This example confirms, in a disturbing way, that cannibalism can easily escape scientific rationality.

If we go back to Forsyth’s paper, we have now seen that, up to this point, the story as assembled, when subjected to a proper reading, allow to say that some Jesuits wanted to describe Brazil as a place where at least some natives practised cannibalism in varied but undetailed forms. We also noted that the Tupinamba had a particular rite involving the execution and butchering of a prisoner, the state of the sources suggesting that cannibalism, despite repeated appearances in the material, might not have been associated with that practice. This is less — by a wide margin — than what Forsyth thought he had already proven by that point.

The eyewitness accounts should nonetheless prove decisive in order to resolve the issue. A Jesuit named Blasquez, for instance, describes an agreement between Westerners and natives, though we cannot say with certainty if he personally witnessed it. This agreement allowed natives to execute prisoners

(39) Ibid., p. 151.
(40) Ibid., p. 152.
(41) Ibid., p. 165.
(42) Ibid., p. 167.
(43) Ibid., p. 169.
(44) Ibid., p. 171.
(45) Ibid., p. 169.


as long as they did not eat them. Incidentally, this is a testimony about the natives not practising cannibalism and about the Portuguese fearing that they might. Blasquez seems to be sure that this was a Christian victory, but it would be pure conjecture on our part to believe that the natives involved did indeed lose something: they could as well have promised not to do something they would not have done anyway.

A witness named Anchieta, for his part, saw with his own eyes the execution of two people (a slave and a prisoner) and their subsequent butchering. As quoted by Forsyth:

'Some pierced the cut off members with sharp sticks, others smeared their hands with fat and went about smearing the faces and mouths of others, and it was such that they gathered blood in their hands and licked it, an abominable spectacle, such that they had a great slaughter on which to gorge themselves'.

This is a remarkable first-hand and quite detailed account of the practice of a specific form of cannibalism: the ingestion of small amounts of human blood. We finally found the highly reliable testimony we were looking for. Forsyth, however, seems to have seen something else in it, since he introduces the quotation as follows: 'One of the things [Anchieta] observed was the execution and eating of one of the Indian slaves'. Once again, he does not seem to have properly read the extract or, maybe, he made a baseless conjecture using the ambiguous last sentence of Anchieta's testimony.

Finally, the most personal accounts in Forsyth's paper all come from a Jesuit named Navarro. The first quotation used, though, is fairly useless: Navarro recounts how, not long after his arrival in Brazil, he baptized prisoners in a village; he adds to his account a reference to the common knowledge according to which prisoners of that kind were meant to be eaten, but this mention is completely out of context. Such a testimony has the same poor level of reliability as the stories commonly spread for the European public at the same time (see above).

The second quotation deserves much more attention: Navarro tells of his personal experience in a village where, in his presence, people were cooking the body of a girl and other body parts. The extract requires a careful reading, in order to distinguish between, on the one hand, what the natives said or did, and, on the other hand, what Navarro thought about it. Here is how events and behaviours unfold in Navarro's testimony: the natives say that they have killed a girl – Navarro sees them cook the body – he thinks they are going to eat it and wants to stop them – his interpreter refuses to translate anymore – Navarro befriends the natives (how?) – he visits other houses and sees body parts being cooked in the smoke – he convinces the natives (how?) not to 'carry out such a great evil' – the natives say they have buried the flesh – Navarro concludes: 'and it seems to me that they reformed somewhat, at least in public one does not see them'.

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This story, once again, is about cannibalism, but without cannibalism. The natives kill a girl, cook a body and bury human flesh; Navarro fears cannibalism, fights against cannibalism and triumphs over cannibalism; communication between the two sides depends on an unwilling interpreter. On Navarro's own admission, cannibalism remains invisible. There is therefore no link, apart from conjectures, between the natives' behaviour (what he saw) and Navarro's interpretation of the situation (what he thought). This is therefore a disquieting testimony about cannibalism, but a remarkable one about bodily treatments.

The third and last quotation translated from Navarro's writings is partly a repetition of the previous episode. In the information added to his story, Navarro explains why he cannot baptize the natives:

'They are strongly rooted to [the practice] of eating human flesh, in such a manner that, when they are about to pass out of this world, they immediately ask for human flesh, saying that they have no other consolation than this, and if they don't get it, they say that they go the most miserable of men on earth. Their consolation is their vengeance. I spend most of my time censuring this vice. The answer that some give me is that only the old women eat it. Others tell me that their ancestors ate [human flesh], so that they must eat it too, that it is their custom to avenge themselves in that manner, for their enemies eat them: so why do I want to take them from their genuine delicacy?'

Multiple levels of discourse are mixed up in this extract. The story about dying natives asking for human flesh is probably second-hand. If we read a bit further, indeed, we see through his questions and the answers provided to him that Navarro does in fact not really know who asks for or eats human flesh, how they do so and why. As was manifest in previous cases, this extract is unable to prove that these Brazilian natives practised cannibalism; on the other hand, it proves that they were at least talking about it – and not without discrepancies. It also shows that Navarro strongly believed that they ate human flesh but was never able to witness it or to define it precisely.

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Elusive cannibalism, elusive source criticism

This simple analysis based on a careful reading of the historical material is quite at odds with Forsyth's absurd conclusion: 'Considerable detail concerning the practice of killing and eating captured enemies is given in these sources'. We should note, however, that these obvious weaknesses did not affect at all the influence of this paper, still widely used today as one of the main references proving the inanity of Arens's radical thesis.

The way Forsyth uses the 'no smoke without fire' rule is also very consequential. According to him, if the Jesuits fought against cannibalism, it is necessarily because it was "pervasive": if not, why would they waste their time...
doing so. Finally, he tries to deliver the decisive blow: ‘If the Tupinamba did not practice cannibalism, numerous experienced and knowledgeable Jesuits lied outright [...]. If we cannot believe the voluminous testimony, full of painstaking detail, that anthropophagy was indeed practised, how can we possibly believe anything these people had to say about Indian customs and behaviour?’

From our point of view, there is naturally no such thing as ‘painstaking detail’ about the practice of cannibalism in this paper, but this is not even the most serious issue here. Forsyth is obviously naïve about the mentality and motives of sixteenth century Jesuits, but his understanding of testimonies as either truths or lies is also dramatically simplistic: authors and sources can be reliable and unreliable at the same time, following their contexts, their aims, their internal logics. Source criticism precisely implies some fastidious but rewarding work that sheds light on the complexity of any testimony and on the wealth of information of varying quality that it contains.

This case study illustrates some of the most common mistakes in the treatment by anthropologists of historical material depicting man-eating. We could extend the same analysis to an alarming part of the literature similarly aimed at the demonstration of the reality of the practice of cannibalism. These studies have, nevertheless, contributed to support the mistaken idea that the cannibal controversy is a thing of the past while, in fact, the methods used never quite adapted enough to meet renewed critical expectations. American cannibals in particular have been the focus of a number of unsatisfying studies of this kind, but a short example about Fijian material will demonstrate that the problem is quite widespread.

In 2006, Patrick Brantlinger published a paper focusing on what he describes as two exemplary Fijian historical sources dealing with cannibalism, both written by nineteenth-century missionaries. Unfortunately, these texts in fact only include vague second-hand accusations of cannibalism and, as identified by Brantlinger himself, the empty cannibal boasting of a local king. In general, these texts are full of the expectation of cannibalism or of bodily treatments that could possibly lead to an ulcerous but invisible consumption. Contradictions are common: at one point, cannibalism is said to be a masculine and chiefly privilege, while later we face graphic depictions of whole villages preparing collectively for a cannibal feast.

Upon reading the extracts reproduced in full by Brantlinger, it appears that these missionaries never described cannibalism or said it happened in front of them, while both were still sure it was practised. Strangely, Brantlinger, like Forsyth before him, remains untroubled by this absence and relies implicitly on the ‘no smoke without fire’ rule. He even concludes that the practice of cannibalism is a perfectly established fact thanks to these reliable eyewitnesses. We find the same pattern of mistakes already identified in the study of the

Brazilian Jesuit testimonies: the letter of the sources is ignored, the conjectures of the authors are taken at face value, and the existence of variable discursive levels is not taken into account.

A wide review of anthropological studies dedicated to the study of cannibalism shows how complex the relationship between anthropology and source criticism is: the method is sometimes simply rejected as dangerous or pointless, it is often ignored and it is regularly misused. Some fringe studies written in support of Arens use it properly, or even excessively, but have had very little influence on the anthropological debate. It is therefore fascinating that, despite Arens’s focus on sources and reliability, the related methodology – source criticism – never explicitly came to the front of the debate. Even in the few cases where sources were carefully studied before the probability or reality of cannibalism was convincingly established, the treatment of the historical material was not exactly systematized.

Georges Guille-Escuret, with whom we opened this paper, and his ambitious ‘Comparative Sociology of Cannibalism’ unfortunately do not stray from the methodological line established by his predecessors. He is convinced that sceptics have been focusing too much on isolated testimonies. While he is fully aware that, taken one by one, the sources are not very convincing, this does not mean much, according to him, if you look at the bigger picture – if you look for general tendencies in the record. Absurd statistical realities thus become historical facts and the ‘no smoke without fire’ rule is amply used: what is repeated most often becomes valid information.

This is how rumour works but certainly not how History or Anthropology should work. It seems that, sadly, the cannibal controversy has wasted too much time on ideology or theory and not enough on methodology. Let us hope that some much-needed interdisciplinarity will finally be able to renew our understanding of cannibalism as a practice, as a metaphor, as a fear, as a fantasy, as an ideological tool or as anything else it might be.

(56) Ibid., p. 172.
(57) Ibid., p. 172.
SUMMARY

Marie-Aline LAURENT & Vincent VANDENBERG, There Is no Smoke without Fire: Cannibalism, Source Criticism, and a Famous Anthropological Controversy

Our contribution to this volume owes much to the demanding methodological standards many of us learnt at Alain Dierkens’s side. We focus here on the mistaken use of source criticism in a famous anthropological controversy about the reality of the customary practice of cannibalism. By taking into account the old and deep-rooted Western fascination for cannibalism, we highlight common mistakes in the treatment of cannibalism-related historical material.


RÉSUMÉ

Marie-Aline LAURENT & Vincent VANDENBERG « Il n’y a pas de fumée sans feu » : le cannibalisme, la critique des sources et une célèbre controverse anthropologique

Notre contribution à ce volume doit beaucoup aux exigences méthodologiques que nombre d’entre nous avons appris aux côtés d’Alain Dierkens. Nous nous intéressons ici aux usages de la critique des sources au cœur d’une célèbre controverse anthropologique à propos de la réalité du cannibalisme contemporain. Tout en tenant compte de la fascination ancienne et durable de l’Occident à l’égard du cannibalisme, nous mettons en évidence des erreurs récurrentes dans le traitement du matériel historique ayant trait au cannibalisme.


SAMENVATTING

Marie-Aline LAURENT & Vincent VANDENBERG, « Er is geen rook zonder vuur »: kannelnisme, bronkritiek en een beroemde antropologische controverse

Onze bijdrage aan dit volume is grotendeels te danken aan de veelzijdige methodologische normen die velen van ons met Alain Dierkens hebben geleerd. We richten ons hier op het verkeerde gebruik van bronkritiek in een beroemde antropologische controverse over de realiteit van de gebruikelijke praktijk van kannibalisme. Door retoning te houden met de oude en diepgewortelde westers fascinatie voor kannibalisme, belichten we veelgaans fouten bij de behandeling van kannibalisme-gerelateerde historisch materiaal.