

# Shedding the Barbaric Stereotype Associated with Cannibalism

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## *Abstract*

Cannibalism, the consumption of human body parts, has been a part of important cultural traditions throughout history. Despite European perceptions of cannibalism as barbaric, it remained a common practice in many communities. In cultures such as the Aghori of India, cannibalism was common, with its members consuming human skulls and flesh. Despite the controversy behind the subject of cannibalism, it is crucial to note that cannibalism has also been observed in religious traditions, such as the Catholic Church's practice of consuming the symbolic body and blood of Christ. The benefits of cannibalism are endless, and cultures that continue to practice it are witnesses. However, the arrival of Europeans in the New World marked a turning point in the perception of cannibalism. European perspectives on cannibalism were instrumental in reshaping the way the practice was perceived and understood. This study seeks to show how various cultures practiced cannibalism and its significance to these cultures. The study also seeks to prove that the over-simplification of cannibalism leads to many misconceptions about it and its cultural significance. Cannibalism was a way of showing love to the dead, maintaining spirituality, protecting the soul, and providing medicinal benefits.

## **Introduction**

In early 2017, Reza Aslan – a TV host attached to CNN – faced explosive backlash after eating parts of a cooked human brain. He was in the company of a Hindu sect (the Aghori of India) that drinks using human skulls and consumes human flesh (Khapaeva 121). The uproar surrounding Reza Aslan's consumption of a human brain ignited a controversial debate around cannibalism. The public discourse surrounding Aslan's act was largely characterized by revulsion, viewing cannibalism not only as a taboo with no underlying value, but also as an "aggressive, barbaric, and degrading act" (Rahn 77). Throughout the late 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans who were coming to terms with the New World described some Indigenous peoples as engaging in cannibalism in a similar manner (Gutierrez, 2019). The term "barbaric" was often used by Europeans to describe colonized peoples as simple and uncomplicated, validating their own perceived cultural superiority. However, overwhelming anthropological studies clarify that cannibalism is neither an uncommon nor a distant cultural practice. It was, and is still in some cultures, common practice despite the opposition it attracts in contemporary society.

The uproar that followed the TV host is a major form of over-simplification that casts a veil on cannibalism. This paper seeks to re-examine this antiquated view that cannibalism is a barbarous practice of primitive groups, and to shed light on the intricate processes and reasons for cannibalism.

## **The Context**

Europeans used their definitions of primitivism and barbarism to validate their claims to land and people, solidifying cannibalism as a "trait of uncivilized, barbaric, and primitive people" (Burley 11). The 16th and 17th century Europeans promoted certain beliefs about the New World's indigenous groups that portrayed them as bereft of human qualities, making it easy to classify them as uncivilized and crude (Welton 155). The concept of cannibalism was woven into the fabric of the world by Europeans. As European colonization of the Americas continued, the discourse of cannibalism grew to become a critical defining feature of the colonial experience (Lindenbaum 486). Cannibalism was painted to be a savage act beyond the European realm, yet anthropological research reveals different findings.

## **Cannibalism as a Pathway to Enlightenment**

Endocannibalism, the practice of consuming the flesh of a member of one's own group, acts as a pathway to enlightenment for the Aghori. Being part of a Hindu sect, this group is devoted to achieving what they refer to as *moksha* - a higher level of liberation (Mishka, 2016). It is a stage of enlightenment that is adored and cherished among the Aghori regarding their religious background. Indeed, every member's ultimate goal is to attain this supreme enlightenment (Bosmia et al. 1786). Most of the practices that they undertake to achieve this state are abhorred by orthodox Hinduism. However, what is considered taboo by the orthodox Hindu is what the Aghori believe to be the key to unlocking the state of transcendence (Bosmia et al. 1786). Further, they believe that following the proper way can accelerate the progress toward spiritual enlightenment (Kakar, 2018).

The Aghori believe that everything is sacred, including the corpse, while mainstream Hindus may perceive the corpse to be unclean because they act as a link between the worlds of the dead and the living. By interacting with the corpse and eating the flesh, they focus on "transcending all dichotomies, see through the illusory nature of all human categories and attain nirvana by becoming one with ultimate reality" (Thomas). The Aghori believe that only those who follow the right path to enlightenment have the opportunity to detach themselves permanently from the wheel of existence. To escape this permanence, one of the most preferred routes is through the corpse and endocannibalism. They consume the flesh of corpses, either roasted or in raw form, intending to affirm their belief system (Kakar, 2018).

There is also an underlying belief that what locks people away from attaining enlightenment is the fear of death. Therefore, those who are able to overcome this fear are gifted with liberty. They practice cannibalism to break through the wall of spiritual freedom (Kakar, 2018). Through cannibalism, the Aghori also confront and embrace death in its entirety to signify that they have denounced worldly customs and effectively broken the reincarnation cycle (Bosmia et al. 1786).

## **Attaining Spiritual Sustenance**

Besides enlightenment, cannibalism is also practiced symbolically to attain spiritual sustenance in certain religions. The Eucharist is an example of how cannibalism can be used

metaphorically to represent spiritual sustenance. Some Christian denominations, such as Catholics, follow this practice and partake in it, believing that the bread and wine are transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ, bringing them closer to eternal life. The reference is made to the word of Jesus Christ, who stated, "This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." and "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:19-20).

In this regard, Christians are taking part in a form of ritual cannibalism by sharing the flesh and blood of Christ. It is a process that is often referred to as Transubstantiation. These sects of Christian faith are built on this practice because it is through it that they will access eternity. Although they do not consume the blood and body of Christ literally, this is a form of cannibalism in its metaphorical sense. The practice is meant to fill that 'spiritual' void that comes with sustenance. According to Cho (2022), the Holy Communion or the Eucharist is also a unique form of cannibalism known as theophagy because it is linked with the 'Eating of Gods'. Just like the Aghoris, Christians consume the body and blood of Christ to achieve a higher level of spiritual sustenance. In this perspective, cannibalism sheds the barbaric and savage trait that it is often associated with, especially in the West.

### **Demonstrating Love for the Dead**

Cannibalism was also practiced out of love for the dead among the Fore people in the past. The Fore people have a distinct process of conducting transumption that involved family members and other designated members in their society. The entire corpse was prepared for a feast, and close relatives were allowed to consume certain parts of the corpse. The daughters of the deceased ate the head; the widow took the genitals and intestines; women who went to grieve with the widow consumed any of the remaining meat, and men consumed the flesh of the arms, legs, and torso.

According to Whitfield et al. (3721), "to ensure that the *kwela (flesh)* departed to *kwelanandamundi* (the home of ancestors) and the deceased became a complete ancestor, the entire body had to be eaten and, for this reason, the women ensured that the brain was all eaten" (p. 3723). The feast signified a deep love for the dead. It was even considered the ultimate expression of respect for the dead. By conducting all these obsequies, the Fore people ensured that the souls of the deceased were reintegrated into the family (Whitfield et al. 3721). Apart from ensuring that the soul returned to its rightful place, the Fore people chose to eat the dead in the belief that it was better than allowing the body to be devoured by worms and insects (Whitfield et al. 3721). There is little to suggest that the practice was based on the beliefs of the Fore people. Instead, the practice of eating the dead was done out of love for the dead and it was cherished.

### **Protecting the Soul**

Cannibalism is also practiced to protect the soul. The Yanomami tribe from South America do not believe that death occurs naturally (Conklin). Instead, they believe that it occurs as a result of evil interventions from a rival group. Therefore, when a death occurs

within the tribe, the spirit must always be protected and guided to transition into the spiritual world.

Specific funeral rituals must be performed to accomplish this goal, but one of the major ones involves endocannibalism.

The Yanomami tribe believes that eating the flesh of the dead tribesman keeps the spirit alive for generations (Conklin). Only the relatives and loved ones of the dead are allowed to eat the flesh to protect the soul. What remains of the bones is made into a powder, mixed with ashes, and used to make banana soup (Lester et al. 429). This is the only delicacy that everyone is allowed to partake. In case an enemy is involved in the death of a tribesman, only the female members are allowed to consume the ashes before a revenge mission is carried out (Gutiérrez 393). Today, this tribe continues to resist the influence of modernization because they profoundly believe in protecting the spirit in its journey to the spiritual world.

### **Medical Purposes**

Cannibalism has also been used throughout human history for medical purposes. Western history proves that what may be viewed as barbaric today was once a critical source of medical cure for Europeans. According to (Fouilloux et al. 1296), cannibalism for medicinal purposes was widespread in Western history because both the aristocracy and the proletariat were partakers of the practice. Some critical parts used for healing conditions such as bleeding and migraines included blood, human fat, and bone powder (Fouilloux et al. 1296). Interestingly, the physicians and patients believed that the best parts were those from corpses that had experienced violence before death. Violence had a way of entrapping the “individual’s spirit within the mortal coil” for a short time to allow the living to extract some benefits from it (Lovejoy, 2016, par. 2). Most of these benefits were curative in nature. For example, during the Renaissance, human blood was commonly used as a health tonic. It was a practice reserved for a select few members of society who believed that drinking blood harvested from the dead could revitalize their spirits, especially if the blood came from a young person (Watson 250).

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was a strong belief that epilepsy could be cured through the consumption of blood taken from the freshly dead (Watson 250). When let to dry, it could also be used on those with problems such as nose bleeding or stopping bruises (Omasanjuwa 40). The medical benefits attached to cannibalism extend beyond the use of human blood.

Mummies were also sought for their medical benefits. Today, these are 'commodities' of museums, but during the Renaissance, they were being pursued for their medicinal properties. 15<sup>th</sup>-century Europe was notorious for this practice because the corpses were supposedly found to have a curing effect on bruises (Noble 80). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, corpses were used to treat joint pains and protect against venomous bites (Noble 80). Pharmacies were stocked with human ingredients to help the living with their ailments and conditions. Europeans also found human fat to be a pain-killer when used with hemlock and opium (Sugg 825).

Europeans also used skulls for their healing properties. King Charles II is cited,

among other notable persons, to have paid a school professor money to deliver powdered skull (Sugg 825). The skull would then be distilled into spirits that helped cure stomach issues, convulsions, and even epilepsy. During times of war in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the English transported skulls from the battlefields for their own medical use back in Germany (Sugg, 2015).

This historical evidence of Europeans using human remains for medicinal purposes, including cannibalism, reveals the hypocrisy of labeling indigenous people as savage for engaging in the same practices. It highlights how Westerners used the idea of cannibalism as a tool to justify their colonization and exploitation of other cultures, despite the fact that they themselves were engaging in similar practices in certain circles. It was just a way to affirm the statement of 'less civilized' that allowed for colonization and exploitation.

### **Implications of Cannibalism**

Cannibalism should not be viewed as a pervasive symbol of 'otherness'. It is even odd that cannibalism was made out to be a barbaric act by the West when aspects of the same can be seen throughout European history. Ritualistic cannibalism is at the center of European history through practices such as the Eucharist and the Renaissance era's standard practice of using human flesh and blood for medicine. The Europeans used the stereotype of savagery in cannibalism to penetrate the Americas and Indigenous peoples as colonizers.

The stereotype helped to advance the idea that "savages should be treated with all rigor as bestial and hardly human" (Lindenbaum, 2004, p.489). Consequently, the portrayal of cannibalism as a barbaric act evolved with the expansion of Europeans into the New World to initiate the process of cultural absolutism.

### **Conclusion**

Cannibalism is not barbaric as it has come to be strongly branded in the modern world. The Europeans prescribed it to be a savage act upon entering the New World, yet it has been practiced throughout human history, across the globe to achieve varying benefits for society members. Cannibalism was indeed a socially sanctioned practice that could be used to maintain an eternal link with the dead. It was practiced as a customary rite, and still is in some cultures today, on the grounds of spiritual beliefs. The living members enriched their lives with attributes of the departed spirit by consuming the corpse. The Fore turned towards cannibalism to express their love and respect to the dead, while the same Europeans who called it a barbaric act, turned to it for its medical benefits. Cannibalism is not the barbaric act that Europeans have portrayed it to be upon coming to the New World. It is a practice that is embedded in human history.

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