

Letters

Existence of Cannibalism

The suggestion that cannibalism is a myth, discussed in Gina Kolata's article about William Arens' research (Research News, 20 June, p. 1497) suffers from logical flaws. If we cannot accept (i) reports of cannibalism by early explorers, some of whom admittedly mistook murder or mortuary ritual for cannibalistic activity; (ii) reports of professional researchers such as Carleton Gajdusek or Margaret Mead, who either witnessed or heard of cannibalism in their field experiences; or (iii) the evidence from archeology that is suggestive of cannibalism, then we have virtually no evidence for such activity. The reasoning here is along the lines of those few historians who would claim that the holocaust of World War II did not happen.

The article ends with Arens stating that, since "there is no evidence of cannibalism, we have a moral responsibility not to portray people in such a way." To the contrary, as anthropologists we have a responsibility to the facts of the variety of human behavior, past and present. Cannibalism, for survival, in ritual, or gustatory, has been a fact of human experience in many societies, at least in the form of survival cannibalism. It has obviously been a part of the aberrant behavior of individuals in a number of societies, and whether it was a part of legitimate ritualized experience, except in times of stress or transitions from one state of life to another, is a legitimate research question. The tenor of the article to the contrary, very few anthropologists question the existence of cannibalism. I agree with Arens, however, that the imputation of cannibalism at a particular archeological site or to a living social group should be made with the utmost care. It is in this that the anthropologist's moral responsibility lies, not in a potential revisionist hypothesis that belies the veracity of every line of evidence available to us.

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It was surprising to read about William Arens' belief that no people have ever practiced cannibalism. I believe Gajdusek is correct in his disagreement and that its occurrence in New Guinea has been 100 percent documented. Arens is incorrect when he says that groups never say that they themselves are or even recently were cannibalistic,

that it is always their enemies or strangers or other more primitive groups of people. The Fijians in the first half of this century readily admitted that their recent forebearers and even some surviving Fijians had been cannibals. The Baktaman, Fore, Gimi, and Bimin-Kuskusmin have all discussed their own anthropophagic practices with sophisticated and reliable anthropologists. When Robert Klitzman studied the incubation period of kuru in individuals who had participated in the last three necrophagic ceremonies, he was able to learn just who had eaten parts of whom, and often just what parts (1).

In what is perhaps the most definitive source, namely, *The Ethnography of Cannibalism* (2), one can find definite evidence that Arens was incorrect in his belief that no anthropologist had ever witnessed cannibalistic acts. Fitz John Porter Poole, who lived among the Bimin-Kuskusmin for 2 years in the early 1970's, clearly states (2, pp. 15-17) that he observed men as well as women eat specific portions of deceased persons on a number of occasions. This was, of course, a means of preserving or gaining essential qualities of the deceased.

Steadman's suggestion that the Fore may have contracted kuru from a European who had a variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease is improbable, as is the statement, "Steadman notes . . . that the turn of the century, when kuru was first noticed among the Fore, is also the time of the first European contact." No Europeans (or Australians) even entered the highlands until the early 1930's, and most areas remained virtually closed until after the Second World War. The first Australian patrol entered the Fore region in 1948, and kuru had already affected individuals before the patrol arrived. It is believed that kuru started some years after cannibalism began among the Fore and Gimi and that it disappeared in various areas progressively as the areas stopped the practices of necrophagia (1).

It is also strange that ethnologists find it inconceivable that people could have eaten human flesh. It is certainly no more brutal or primitive than practices carried out during the Nazi era, in Siberian prison camps, and recently in some Latin American countries, and at least in most places it served ritual purposes.

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2. F. J. P. Poole, in *The Ethnography of Cannibalism*, P. Brown and D. Tuzin, Eds. (Society for Psychological Anthropology, Washington, DC, 1983).

I have no idea whether or not certain tribespeople in New Guinea practice cannibalism, and I do not wish to take either side in a debate. I must, however, question the relevance of Gajdusek's argument that "the whole of Australia knows these people are cannibals" as well as his observation that countless tribe members have been arrested for cannibalism by Australian authorities. These assertions may well be true, but they prove nothing. At one time virtually the whole population of Europe and much of Britain and America "knew" that witches existed and countless persons were not only arrested but put to death for allegedly practicing witchcraft. Nevertheless, it is now generally acknowledged that witches, defined as persons with supernatural powers of diabolical origin, do not exist and never did.

Gajdusek may or may not have other proof for the existence of cannibalism in New Guinea, but he does his case no good by arguing, in effect, that if a lot of people, including civil authorities, believe in the occurrence of some questionable practice then it must be so.

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Diet and Cancer

A number of readers have asked that I give literature support for my statement (Letters, 4 Apr., p. 11) that excessive amounts of vitamins A and C may promote cancer. As few as 7,500 retinol equivalents (25,000 international units) of vitamin A taken daily early in pregnancy were associated with teratogenicity in human infants (1); it has also been reported that excessive vitamin A promoted aflatoxin-induced liver cancer in rats (2) and that excessive vitamin C may promote human leukemia (3). Regarding fiber, a recent report indicated that the highest frequency of colon cancer occurred in a sample of women eating the most cereal fiber (4).

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2. J. Colford and R. S. Parker, *Fed. Proc. Fed. Am. Soc. Exp. Biol.* 45, 1089 (1986).
3. C. H. Park, *Cancer Res.* 45, 3969 (1985).
4. J. D. Potter and A. J. McMichael, *J. Natl. Cancer Inst.* 76, 557 (1986).

Erratum: In the third paragraph of the briefing "New funds for AIDS drug centers" by Deborah M. Barnes (News & Comment, 25 July, p. 414), the name of the drug foscarnet was spelled incorrectly.