

Anthropology Book Forum

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SIEFKES, C. (2022). *Edible People: The Historical Consumption of Slaves and Foreigners and the Cannibalistic Trade in Human Flesh*. New York: Berghahn Books. 332 pp., ISBN 978-1-80073-613-9

Keywords: Cannibalism, Slavery, History, Morality, Death

Christian Siefkes' book *Edible People: The Historical Consumption of Slaves and Foreigners and the Cannibalistic Trade in Human Flesh* confronts the Western cultural taboo of cannibalism head on, exploring historical accounts of the practice and its interconnections with other notoriously violent institutions such as slavery and xenophobia. This work uncovers a deep, untold history of cannibalism by asking questions that have been avoided in most academic literature, confronting the “what,” “why,” and most chillingly “how” of cannibalistic practices around the world. It identifies cannibalism as having a much deeper sociocultural meaning than simply “eating the flesh of one’s own species,” accounting for factors such as international commercialism, gender, politics, and internal and external power structures (p.6). Major points of analysis focus on understanding how human flesh can begin to be socially conceptualized as “edible,” and subsequently valuable as an item commerce, among certain culture groups. After giving ethnographic examples, Siefkes confronts the philosophical concepts surrounding cannibalism, searching for an explanation for the huge cultural deviation in moral positions ranging from total acceptance to inherent disgust and disapproval.

The volume contains an introduction, 15 central chapters, and a conclusion. The Introduction lays out a base understanding of our contemporary perspectives on cannibalism, focusing on the almost total Western rejection and erasure of the practice. This is referred to as “cannibalism denial” (p.2). The false narrative of a historically “universal taboo” is consistently disproven throughout the rest of the book. However, this taboo is still an important basis in the author’s analysis concerning Western involvement and participation in cannibalism. This portion also addresses the possible

limitations of validity in reported sources, ultimately concluding that sources with multiple reports are truly describing actual practices and can be believed.

Chapter 1 works to develop a taxonomy of the circumstances and motives reported to drive cannibalism, giving readers a necessary vocabulary to understand the deep analysis of the varied practices discussed in later chapters. This includes definitions of a large range of cannibal acts, for example highlighting the differences between violent acts of cannibalism and what the author refers to as corpse-eating, where the victim is not murdered but instead already dead upon consumption.

Chapters 2-10 center around the numerous historical and ethnographic reports of slave eating, where slave-owners choose to kill and consume enslaved individuals. People are reduced to commodities through the practice of slavery, and in certain cultures where cannibalism is also socially accepted this has resulted in the practice of utilizing slaves as a food source. Places where this practice has been recorded include New Zealand, the Bismarck Archipelago near New Guinea, Sumatra, and the Congo. The Congo has produced a remarkably high number of reports, which are covered in Chapters 6-8.

Western influence on slave-eating is a major focus of this portion of the book. This includes outside commercial and social pressures influencing acts of cannibalism, performed both unintentionally and, in some cases, deliberately. For example, in the 19th century in the Congo there were multiple reports of European men trading slaves to cannibal groups in exchange for ivory tusks. They were aware of the fate of the people they were trading but chose to turn a blind eye in exchange for expensive goods (pp.52-56). Social pressures can be seen in the case of the Jameson Affair, where a European explorer paid for a young slave girl who was then immediately butchered by Congolese cannibals for food in front of him (p. 151). These reports lead the author to a discussion of the Obeyesekere conjecture. This is the idea that cannibalism was relatively rare as a practice outside of human sacrifices until European explorers appeared, “unsettling and disrupting traditional social structures” and spreading cannibalism (p.164). Siefkes debunks the majority of this theory but uses the basic concepts behind it to discuss how the slave trade did in fact help to further promote cannibal practices in Africa.

Chapters 11 and 12 discuss foreigner poaching, a form of xenophobia resulting in acts of violent cannibalism against outsiders. This practice historically has been reported in New Guinea, Fiji, and Central Africa. Chapter 13 focuses broadly on the commercial aspects of cannibalism and how this translated to practices of “corpse exchange” in Melanesia and parts of Africa. This includes trade of human flesh that was already dead on the market, straying from the typical practice of trading living people who will then be killed when convenient for consumption. This practice was typically shaped by the availability of victims through either war, slavery, or capture. Chapters 14 and 15 analyze commercial and culinary evidence of cannibalism in China, discussing multiple instances of these practices in times in famine and war. These chapters examine the feelings of desperation caused by starvation, giving the book’s first example of a defined state resorting to cannibalistic practices, and showing the fluidity of social acceptance in terms of cannibalism.

The book makes it clear that there is also a strong gendered aspect to acts of cannibalistic consumption. In almost every case reported in *Edible People*, women and children were the preferred victims of cannibalism. In addition to this, the marginal status of women as “outsiders” in cultural groups put them in constant danger. A man could decide to “punish” his wife if she misbehaved, allowing her to be eaten. The husband could also die, leaving her vulnerable to the rest of the group. Men’s place as a member of the group was permeant, while women’s status was more likely to be fluid. Beyond the gender of the victim, the gender of the consumer was often significant as well. Women were often limited, if not completely excluded, from joining cannibal meals or feasts. They were offered less “choice” pieces if any at all.

Although the hook of *Edible People* is certainly in the dark nature of its subject matter, I found this book to be a fascinating analysis of both morality and humanity. It confronts historical reports of practices that go against our contemporary understanding of what it means to be human, showing how various cultures have had different definitions of humanity over time. The people that these groups killed and ate were not considered to be on the same level of being as their consumers. They were socially understood to be commodities, not full people, and therefore there was no guilt felt when they were utilized in that way. Although it is important to recognize that there is a modern universal rejection of cannibalism, these historical examples show social

flexibility in where the line is drawn when defining humanity. Ultimately, Siefkes rejects the idea of total cultural relativism to explain the differences in this moral line, but instead agrees with a combination of it alongside a limited version of moral universalism to deal with the phenomena. Together they allow for an understanding of cultural diversity that avoids concepts such as “cannibalism denial” while also admitting that there is some universal idea of morality that is being broken when it comes to acts of cannibalism.

The book targets both academic and general audiences, making it a great resource concerning the history and ethnographic analysis of cannibalism. The author gives an impressively unbiased survey of the practice to get to the root of the “why,” making the book both historical and anthropological in nature. It would be appropriate for a very specific seminar class on either cannibalism or slavery but may be too in depth for broader anthropology courses. The book itself is well-written with engaging figures that add greatly to the material.

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