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Cannibalism, Religion Rituals, Love and Violence

There are several options on how to deal with the remains of dead human bodies. You can bury them, burn them, you can put them on a boat and let it go sailing, you can mummify them and put them into a specially-built sarcophagus, you can feed them to vultures, keep them in coffins hanging from rocks, etc. Burning bodies and scattering the ashes is quite popular, although burying is probably still more widespread in the contemporary world. Throwing bodies to the sea, or putting them on a boat, was traditionally an option for sailors and some tribal cultures. Apart from the abovementioned ways of disposing human bodies, there is also another option – to eat the dead bodies. Of course, this last option is the least acceptable for us, but unfortunately our early ancestors did not have many options. To be precise, they had only two options on how to deal with the dead bodies: (1) to eat them, or (2) to leave them. All other options came much later with the development of new technologies.

These two options had different, short-run and long-run consequences. In the short run, if you do not eat the dead body, the predators will eat it – goods such as food never go wasted in nature. You might think this does not matter as the person was already dead, but it does matter in the long run, because if predators can easily obtain and eat human/hominid corpses, there is a good chance that they will become habitual man-eaters. Arguably the biggest expert on man-eating tigers and leopards, Jim Corbett, noted that after the terrible bout of infectious disease that spread through India in the beginning of the 20th century, some of the worst man-eating leopards started their man-eating activities. Leopards apparently were attracted by the readily available human corpses left, unburied, during the disease (Corbett, 2003:xiii). For the very same reason that caused these leopards to adopt their new behaviours, it was important for our ancestors to make sure that no human corpses were available for scavenging predators to eat.

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I therefore suggest that those groups of our ancestors, who would eat the bodies of their dead fellow members, would have forced lions in their neighbourhood to stop hunting humans as a source of food (Jordania, 2011:119-121). As probably the best expert on ancient cannibalism, Tim White noted that not eating the dead body of your fellow group member is a waste of high quality food – but I think this was a secondary reason. The primary reason of cannibalism must have been to deprive predators access to hominid and human corpses. Despite the well-understood repulsive reaction of the readers of this book to my idea, I have to suggest that cannibalism was an important evolutionary strategy of predator control for our ancestors.

There have been wide-ranging disputes over this emotionally charged behaviour in human history and prehistory. The popular image of early human ancestors as big game hunters was enhanced by Raymond Dart's influential theory that early men were violent hunters and ruthless cannibals. As a legacy of our colonial past, it was widely believed until the mid-1960s that many non-European tribes were practicing cannibalism as a cultural practice until recent times. Afterwards came a period when the presence of cannibalism in various cultures was mostly denied. William Arens is particularly well known for his relentless fight to eradicate this shameful legacy from human cultural history (Arens, 1979). In his works, Arens denies virtually all existing evidence that humans were practicing cannibalism in any of their societies as a cultural practice. We must give credit to Arens' revisionist findings, as colonial and religious forces were using cannibalism as a powerful tool with which to prove the moral advantage of "civilized" societies.

From the 1990s onwards, with an accumulating array of the evidence, it became difficult to refute the evidence pointing to a history of cannibalism. The activities of Tim White were paramount in establishing a more realistic picture of cannibalism in human prehistory. According to White, cannibalism was very common in human societies prior to the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic period (White, 2006). This theory is based on the large amount of 'butchered' human bones found in Neanderthal and other Lower/Middle Palaeolithic sites. Food shortages are generally considered as the main reason for cannibalism. Taylor also suggested that Cannibalism was a usual practice in all continents at different times in human history (Taylor, 2002:58-60).

It is important to remember that I am not suggesting that hominids were killing and eating fellow hominids (as is suggested in the famous "man the hunter" hypothesis). Instead, I am proposing that hominid groups were co-operatively and self-sacrificially fighting against predators, and only in the case of a fatal attack from predators were they collectively attacking predators

to reclaim the bodies of their killed group members, and then cannibalizing them in a ritualistic manner. To fight against predators for the body of a fallen group member, and then to cannibalize the body in a ritualized way, has totally different evolutionary and moral overtones. Our distant ancestors are getting undeserved bad publicity for their habit of cannibalism, but I maintain that this was an important survival strategy aimed to stop predators attacking early hominids, largely based on the notion that predators would stop seeing them as a profitable food source if the bodies were regularly claimed back before being devoured. Most of the contemporary big and powerful predators that can easily kill humans do not usually include humans in their diet unless they are incapacitated by wounds and prompted by circumstances – this aversion towards hunting humans is the lasting result of millions of years of 'predator education' and 'strategic cannibalism' by our ancestors.

Apart from forming the attitudes of various predators, cannibalism was an important catalyst in the emergence of ritualistic behaviour and religious sentiment. We can be quite sure that eating the body of a fellow member killed by a predator must have been a highly emotional and highly ritualized act. Let us remember that, in the first place, every member of a hominid group was loved enough that every other member of the group was ready to fight for their dead body. Ritualistic cannibalizing of the body became a very long-practiced tradition, an expression of the utmost love to the member of a group. Until the 20th century, the body of a dead person was ritually eaten by their relatives within at least several tribes on different continents. For example, some indigenous Australians were performing ritual cannibalism mostly as an act of respect. Some Native American tribes believed that one could gain a particular characteristic of a deceased rival by eating their body parts. In various societies, during funeral rituals a respected member of one's own clan was also eaten to ensure immortality.

We have plenty of evidence of this ancient expression of respect and love in our contemporary lives – we just fail to notice them. Have you even thought why you are saying when you see a particularly cute baby, kitten, puppy, or even a young girl (or a boy) "She is so cute I want to eat her?" Or also why we say "You are so sweet," comparing someone you like very much to a sensation related to eating. Have you also thought of why the Communion, the most widespread Christian ritual, is actually based on the ritualized consuming of the flesh and the blood of Jesus Christ?

Cannibalism today is a horrible taboo, making headlines when it occurs for whatever reason, out of starvation, as a part of obscure ritualistic practices or just as a psychological deviation. When Christian missionaries were describing the savagery of many native tribes in America, Africa, Asia and

Australia, the thing generally on top of the list of sins committed by these peoples was listed as cannibalism. Five hundred years ago Queen Isabella of Spain decreed that conquistadores could only enslave the Native American tribes who practiced cannibalism. Apart from ritualized and cultural cannibalism, even starvation-triggered cannibalism was sometimes considered unacceptable. In the middle of the 20th century, non-religious Soviet Union authorities were imprisoning and executing those who participated in cannibalism within the besieged Leningrad. Leningrad was effectively left without any food for almost three years, and once all the pets, birds, and rats were already consumed by the starving population the only food that was left was the population itself. I remember myself meeting a distant relative from Leningrad in the first half of the 1980s, and remember my shock when I asked whether her grandmother was still alive, she swiftly answered "No. She was eaten by her neighbours in Leningrad".

Cannibalism is gradually losing its shock value. In 2011 there had been a well-publicized case of a televised act of cannibalism, when two Dutch TV presenters on a live TV show ate a few grams of each other in the presence of an equally disgusted and excited live audience (Yahoo news, 2011). Famed Mexican painter/muralist Diego River claimed in his autobiography that, in 1904, he and his companions ate human meat on numerous occasions which they had purchased from the local morgue. River even proposed for cannibalism to become a part of the future, to better human society, claiming that "I believe that when man evolves a civilization higher than the mechanized but still primitive one he has now, the eating of human flesh will be sanctioned. For then man will have thrown off all of his superstitions and irrational taboos."

I am not sure whether there will be a time (at least in the next couple of centuries) when a person will be able to buy a piece of human flesh for dinner at a local Woolworths or Aldi store, but I do hope that our views on the reasons and evolutionary history of cannibalism will be changing relatively soon.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, "There is no one satisfactory and all-inclusive explanation for cannibalism. Different peoples have practiced it for different reasons, and a group may practice cannibalism in one context and view it with horror in another." I suggest, that although practices of cannibalism were in use in various regions of the world during the last few centuries, this practice came from a single origin: eliminating the presence of hominid and human dead bodies in the environment so that predators did not have access to readily available corpses – I do not think hominids and

humans were violent creatures who were killing each other in order to eat each other.

Basically, the violence of early hominids seems to be grossly exaggerated. Human morphology does not support this model of ancient violence amongst hominids and early humans. If we imagine that our ancestors were very violent towards each other, natural selection would favour the strongest males and would gradually increase their physical strength. In reality we have a totally opposing picture: during the process of sapienization, male physical strength drastically dropped. We are laughably weak not only in comparison to our closest living relatives – the great apes, but even in comparison to many smaller monkeys. This can only mean that male-to-male combat for female attention, and the selection for stronger males (see, for example puts, 2010), was simply not happening during our evolution. Comparing male strength with females is not a justified argument. Yes, males had to do more defence from predators than females, so they had to be stronger than females, but if the competition between males involved violence against each other then the loss of their previous strength is totally unexplainable.

The decrease of male physical strength is a hard fact that must be always taken into consideration when male violent nature is discussed. The central element of inter-group social interactions was an unbounded and self-sacrificing dedication towards each other - their violence was mostly directed towards predators and other groups threatening their survival.

Of course, humans have the capacity be violent – they can be particularly violent as a group. This is mostly the case when a group of people, for different reasons (mostly out of frustration, anger or nationalistic or religious fervour), goes into a state of collective identity and the individuals lose their ability to logically think for themselves. Human brain chemistry and activity change radically in this state. They do not feel fear, they do not feel pain, and they do not have the inhibitions against violence that many humans do. This 'battle trace' is feared for civil society and coveted within the military forces. In this state humans blindly follow orders or the behaviour of their fellow group members. While in this state, humans are in fact not humans any more, as they lose the ability to think rationally – a crucial difference that sets us apart from other animals. In this state violence is not only allowed, but even welcome. In some cases humans can have memory loss of their actions while in the collective state of mind and in some cases those who remember their actions cannot understand how they could behave so inhumanely. In spite of all this, we should remember that the source of this

blind violence is often the loyalty and love for one's religion, state, unit or family.

So is cannibalism violence? Although cannibalism might seem to us as the pinnacle of abhorrent behaviour and heinous violence, if viewed historically it was a ritual practice aimed to safeguard our ancestors from the attacks of the predators, and in many cultures consuming the body itself was considered as an honour to the person who was eaten, and also sometimes as a great spiritual and physical advantage to those who ate their fellow group member (Conklin, 2011:xxvi).

According to Beth Conklin, the author of a recent book on cannibalism, the challenge is to understand each case of cannibalism in its own terms and within the social context in which it was practiced. With this approach, cannibalism starts to look less exotic and more like something with which other people can identify with. "'Wari' elders have told me they can't understand why outsiders are so obsessed with the idea of eating bodies." Wrote Conklin, "They say it's important to look at the whole picture of what went on in their mourning practices, not just focus on the one act of eating. I think we can learn something by listening to them" (Conklin, 2011). Mourning the death of loved ones is a universal human experience, yet the grieving process between different cultures differs greatly. Until the 1960s, the Wari' Indians of the western Amazonian rainforest ate the roasted flesh of their dead as an expression of compassion to the deceased and his or her close relatives. By removing and transforming the corpse, which embodied ties between the living and the dead and was a focus of grief for the family of the deceased, Wari' death rites helped the kin accept their loss. Cannibalism had also another meaning for the Wari' – apart from their relatives and loved ones, they also feasted on defeated enemies including intruding Portuguese settlers and their hired gunmen. The motivating factors in these two different cases were also different: "Killing and consuming the enemy outsider was partly equating the victim with animals that are hunted -- the manner of eating was explicitly similar to the eating of animals." It was, Conklin says, a way of "marking human dominance over the victim." In a stark contrast, the 'funeral' cannibalism performed on fallen group members was intended to evoke emotional healing after a death.

A recent finding of the skull of a young hominid, reported in the July 2010 issue of National Geographic with Tim White's comments, confirmed one more time the widespread tradition of ritualistic cannibalism among our ancestors.

Apart from archaeological evidence, there is also genetic proof of the past practice of cannibalism in our ancestors. Many humans have a special

gene which protects us against brain diseases (known as prion diseases) that can be contracted by eating contaminated flesh - more specifically the brains of deceased humans. These diseases include Creutzfeld Jacob disease and kuru in humans, as well as mad cow disease – "The discovery of this genetic resistance, which shows signs of having spread as a result of natural selection, supports the physical evidence for cannibalism" wrote John Roach (Roach, 2003).

As time went on, our ancestors obtained tools that made grave-digging possible. Also, their food supply improved, so burying and burning the bodies became a more feasible option than cannibalism, eventuating into the only accepted option to deal with dead bodies. Cannibalism fell out of favour in most of the societies with major state institutions, Aztecs probably being the only exclusion.

To conclude this section on cannibalism, I want to remind readers that there are three main reasons for cannibalism which are generally accepted among scholars: (1) cultural norm, (2) necessity in extreme situations of famine, and (3) insanity or social deviancy. None of them acknowledges the possible evolutionary significance of cannibalism. I suggest adding one more – the primary reason for prehistoric cannibalism: **cannibalism as a mechanism of predator control among early hominids**.

Yes, we are all descendants of cannibals, but the root of cannibalism was not violence. It was of respect, total dedication and love towards the dead. The next time you hear somebody expressing his or her love with the words "I want to eat her" (or him, or a baby, or a kitten, or a cub, or any cute creature), hopefully you will recall where this strange expression of intense affection derives from.