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CANNIBALISM: A WHITE COLONIST FICTION?

RECENTLY IN THE *Weekend Australian* Philip Jones, a distinguished scholar and curator at the Adelaide Museum, deplored Daisy Bates' "insistence on the prevalence of cannibalism in Aboriginal society". He claimed that she "conflated Aboriginal hearsay about cannibalism and mythological accounts". It is hard to fathom why Jones should have chosen Bates as a significant influence on current thinking about cannibalism in Australia, but his comments led one reader at least to look again at some issues.

Herodotus, the "father of history", claimed to have met Indians, probably Parsees, who were horrified to learn that the Greeks buried their dead parents, whereas the Greeks were shocked to find that some Indians ate theirs. Thus cultural relativism may first have taken literary form. Long before and after Herodotus' time, it was generally accepted in many parts of the world that many peoples had once practised cannibalism and that several still did so. Most Australian colonists believed that many Australian Aboriginal peoples were among that number, although Watkin Tench of the First Fleet dissented: "From their manner of disposing of those who die [as well as from other observations], there seems no reason to suppose these people cannibals".

Cannibalism was a feature of many Aboriginal stories about the Dreamtime, although several have recently been sanitised. The Maung people of the Goulburn Islands and the adjacent mainland around Guruwelin told of a Cannibal Giant who kills a pregnant woman. He is careful to eat and cook woman and foetus separately, but he still gets diarrhoea from his feasting. The Bidjandjara told stories of *mamu*, malignant spirits who swooped on defenceless people and ate them, children being a special delicacy. Sometimes children turned the tables and the Bidjandjara told of the giant Tulina, who is himself killed and his genitals given as food to a child he was about to eat. Women are predators in some Bidjandjara stories, as when Minma Jarudu, the Marsupial Mole Woman, kills and eats young men. Prupe, a cannibalistic old woman, was said

to be especially fond of eating young children.

Actual Aboriginal cannibalism sometimes followed tribal warfare. Alfred Howitt (*The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, 1904) described some of their rituals for eating enemies killed in battle. Some Aboriginal groups ate their enemies but not their own kin, whereas other groups ate their own kin but not their enemies. Ripping out the kidneys of a defeated enemy and eating them before his eyes as he died was a custom among some Aborigines that fascinated or terrified some colonists. Joseph Furphy ("Tom Collins") wrote in "A Vignette of Port Phillip", based on the death of an Aboriginal friend of his boyhood, that "it was deemed the prerogative of any victor in mortal combat to take as a trophy the kidneys of the vanquished".

A.P. Elkin ("Beliefs and Practices Connected with Death in North-Eastern and Western South Australia", *Oceania*, VII (3) 1937, pp. 283-85; *The Australian Aborigines*, 1954, p. 313) suggested that burial cannibalism, practised across parts of Queensland, the Gulf of Carpentaria, the northern Kimberley and north-eastern South Australia, had a sacred function: specified parts of the corpse were often available only for specific kindred. Elkin held that in parts of Central Australia and East Kimberley a mother would sometimes consume the flesh of a child stillborn or dead very soon after birth, so that its spirit might soon be born again within her. Baldwin Spencer (*Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 1928, p. 203) thought that among the Aranda cannibalism had been confined to weakly elder siblings, who would thereby gain strength to survive by eating children who died young.

Walter Edmund Roth (*Ethnological Studies among the North-West Central Queensland Aborigines*, 1897, p. 166; *Burial Ceremonies and Disposal of the Dead*, 1907, pp. 398-401) gave detailed accounts of customs such as those of the Pennefather River Aborigines, who cut off, baked and then ate the soles of the feet and fleshy front part of the thighs of dead young men. During this process, Roth held that those Aborigines believed the

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identity would be revealed of the sorcerer responsible for the men's deaths. Roth also described dismemberment, cooking and eating of the dead among the Brisbane people.

Ursula McConnel ("Mourning Ritual among the Tribes of Cape York Peninsula", *Oceania*, VII (3) 1937, pp. 364–68) provided information on burial cannibalism among peoples on the Daintree and Mossman Rivers on the eastern coast of Cape York Peninsula. Several examples of Aboriginal cannibalism were cited by Ronald and Catherine Berndt (*The World of the First Australians*, 1999, pp. 467–70). The Berndts suggested that colonists may have formed an exaggerated idea of the extent of Aboriginal cannibalism, because groups frequently falsely accused their neighbours of it, but the Berndts had no doubt that "burial cannibalism was fairly widespread".

Manning Clark began his *History of Australia* before denial of Aboriginal cannibalism became politically correct on the Australian Left. Even his third volume, covering 1824–51, was subtitled "The Beginning of an Australian Civilization". In it he described (p. 170) how "on the Monoro some white men watched with horror the massacre of some Mega blacks by a party of Monoro blacks, who then skinned and ate them". Clark frequently referred to cannibalism, sometimes with that mixture of the facetious and the oracular which irritated some readers so much, but which evidently captivated many others. He related that a week after joining colonist John Rawson in singing a hymn, "blacks came back to his tent bringing quantities of human flesh and began to eat it with much pleasure, and seemed hurt when Rawson refused to eat it, because they had joined as best they could in the white man's strange corroboree" (p. 269).

In volume four (pp. 350–53) Clark wrote that in 1875 "Black men lay in ambush" for Chinese who "thronged the roads from Cooktown to the gold-fields on the Palmer River". The Aborigines "surrounded them, and massacred those who did not run quickly enough to escape, and threw their bodies onto the coals and ate them". He noted, too, how "Rumours flew around Cooktown and on the fields that the aborigines had converted a cave just off the track to the Palmer into a Devil's Kitchen where they hung the bodies of Chinese by the pigtales until they were ripe for roasting on the coals". Clark claimed that some Aborigines boasted that "'roasted Chinkie' had been added to their menu".

A CHANGE OF SENTIMENT among Australian anthropologists and historians seems to have followed quickly in the wake of American William Arens' 1979 *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology & Anthropophagy*. Arens claimed that allegations of cannibalism among indigenous peoples

had been concocted by colonisers to justify their aggressions. In Australia many progressive academics began to express fears that claims of Aboriginal cannibalism, true or false, caused distress to the Indigenous and strengthened white racism.

Richard Buchhorn, a former priest and then Assistant Secretary to the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, and interviewed on such ABC programs as *Ockham's Razor*, alleged that the evidence provided for cannibalism among Aborigines was "on a par with that for alien abductions" and that claims that "these people are cannibals" could "usually be translated" as "we want their land". Law lecturer Katherine Biber claimed ("Cannibals and Colonialism", *Sydney Law Review*, 27 (4) 2005, p. 629) that "cannibal discourse is the product of colonial anxiety, what Obeyesekere terms a 'dark fantasy' and a 'paranoid ethos.'" Obeyesekere, a Sri Lankan anthropologist, believed that "cannibalism" was a British discourse and its practice was introduced to the natives [Polynesians] by the British".

Biber wrote that "historians and anthropologists rejected allegations of Aboriginal cannibalism when they were re-articulated in 1997, when *The Truth*, a book attributed to (although not written by Pauline Hanson) alleged that Aborigines practised cannibalism and, especially, baby-eating". Biber claimed that "these cannibal claims were derived from works by Hector Holthouse, Henry Mayhew, various travellers and explorers and, especially, Daisy Bates". In 1998 Richard Hall's *Black Armband Days* stated that Aboriginal cannibalism was largely a product of the fevered imagination of Daisy Bates.

Biber knew "from the outset of her research that there is no credible historical evidence to support allegations that indigenous Australians practised the forms of cannibalism sought by the colonists". Yet she quoted from the *Monitor*, November 29, 1827, that after a colonist, Taylor, was killed by Aborigines, all the fleshy parts of his body were cut off, part eaten then and there, and the rest carried away to be devoured another time. Biber did not suggest that the report was false or the incident unique or even rare.

According to Biber, literary scholars such as Peter Hulme and Frank Lestringant had "located cannibal discourse within a particular genre of colonial fantasy". Biber conceded that "Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders—in some areas, in rare circumstances, and in the conduct of rituals—practised some forms of anthropophagy, notably mortuary cannibalism", but that "From an anthropological perspective, these practices had meanings to their practitioners that are not easily translated in colonial categories". Anthropologists such as Biber apparently "resist reading anthropophagous practices through the squeamish lens of Western cannibal myths". Lestringant (*Cannibals: The Discovery and*

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Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne, 1997, p. 7) argued that "anthropophagy (the practice of eating human flesh) does not equal cannibalism", but he failed to explain what he thought the distinction might be.

Jan Wegner of James Cook University, who taught "Aborigines and cannibalism" as "a topic for a third-year course", described Hector Holthouse's *River of Gold*, first published in 1967, as a "turgid potboiler" which, however, "still seems to be first port of call for accounts of Aborigines and cannibalism". Wegner believed that Arens had shown that "there is no solid evidence for the type of cannibalistic practice as proposed by Pauline Hanson". Paul Turnbull, also of James Cook University, agreed that "Hansonesque history is largely confined to Holthouse". Turnbull claimed that miners and police in North Queensland mutilated corpses and then tried to "blame it on the Aboriginal people trying to defend their country".

When addressing the History Institute of Victoria in 1984, Manning Clark declared, "Now, of course, after finishing five volumes I have many regrets. I'm sorry, very sorry, that I didn't really get on earlier with the whole point about the Australian Aborigines." Just what it was that he had not "got on with" earlier he did not make clear. By July 1988 in an essay entitled "The Beginning of Wisdom", cannibalism had disappeared from Clark's conception of the Australian past. Instead Clark's new wisdom led him to rejoice that, "In all the history departments of the universities and colleges of advanced education, teachers and students are burrowing away in libraries to find more examples of white barbarism and cruelty against the Aborigines."

Bryce Moore of Fremantle Arts Centre Press found "any discussion of cannibalism among Aborigines obnoxious, simply because those who seek to draw attention to it implicitly tender cannibalism and other perceived forms of 'savagery' as a justification for the dispossession and genocide practised against Aborigines during the course of the white invasion". Moore added that he did not "think that there is any solid evidence that Aboriginal people were 'cannibals'" and that "on balance the charge is more appropriately levelled against Britons".

In *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, "generously sponsored" by the Department of School Education, the Disadvantaged Schools Program, the Aboriginal Education Unit and the Council for

Aboriginal Reconciliation, Dr Ian Howie-Willis claimed of cannibalism among Aborigines that "evidence of its actual practice is fragmentary, inconsistent and inconclusive". Evidently the allegation was used as a "rationalisation for denying indigenous Australians their rights, occupying their land and destroying their culture", and "so-called witnesses of cannibalism often put forward as their personal experience the unverified experience of someone else".

ONE OF LONDON'S notorious Kray twins allegedly had four defences when accused of committing grievous bodily harm in a public house. First of all, he wasn't even there; second, even if he had been there, he never hit anybody; third, even if he did hit somebody, he didn't hit him hard; and last, the man he hit deserved to be hit. Some historians and anthropologists have run a comparable line on cannibalism. First of all, there was no Aboriginal cannibalism; second, there wasn't much of it; third, it was merely a cultural practice that no outsider is in any position to condemn; and last, to accept the truth about Aboriginal cannibalism would undermine Reconciliation.

In 1982 Richard Routley (later "Sylvan"), then of the Australian National University, published a discussion paper entitled *In Defence of Cannibalism*. Routley's position is perhaps comparable to the Kray defence 4, since he sought to justify cannibalism, not to deny its existence. Routley agreed that it had long been a commonplace of mainstream Western thought that human cannibalism is morally outrageous. He claimed, however, that this repugnance to man eating man had "rested on a tangle of false views and prejudices about the world, its origin, evolution and purposes, and about the creatures that inhabit it, their separateness, and their order (in an alleged chain of being) with humans at the apex".

Routley argued that some forms of cannibalism are morally admissible. He did not consider eating a dead human to be a mark of disrespect, but that on the contrary:

the eating of certain parts of the bodies of dead humans was, among certain tribes who used to practice cannibalism, an act of considerable respect; for it was thought that in that way the eaters could acquire or participate in some of the (former) virtues of the dead, e.g. wisdom, strength, hunting skills, etc.

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Furthermore, he held that, if a body is going to be buried and "eaten" by bacteria, or various carnivores, it might as well be eaten by other human beings; similarly if it is going to be incinerated and the ashes spread, it might better be carefully composted.

Historical examples given by Routley of advocates for the legitimacy of cannibalism included Chrysippus the Stoic, in his treatise *On Justice*, which "permitted eating of the corpses of the dead", as apparently did Diogenes in his *Republic*, Zeno in his *Republic*, and Cleanthes. Routley did not cite Herodotus. I imagined at first, even second, glance that Routley was being satirical along the lines of Swift's *Modest Proposal*, but apparently he intended to present a serious case.

Once we deny or suppress evidence because it may harm a cause dear to our hearts, the slide to moral corruption is usually swift. I was once a gulag and show-

trial denier and attempted on several occasions to use the Kray defences to oppose charges against Stalin and the former Soviet Union. Sometimes I believed what I was saying or writing, but often I knew that charges were all too true; yet defence of the "first workers' state" seemed then my supreme duty. Fortunately, people like me were then in a smallish minority, though far from an unimportant one, in Britain's schools, colleges and universities.

Unfortunately in Australia suppression of inconvenient truths has flourished over the last three decades, although challenges have now been thrown out by a courageous group of scholars that includes Keith Windschuttle, and three of his predecessors as editor of *Quadrant*: Peter Coleman, Roger Sandall and Paddy McGuinness. One past editor, of course, became and remains leader of the pack that attacks post-1788 Australia on so many fronts.

LAST SISTER

Least and last and now, as
the last illness comes and she
takes to bed, largest. The only one
with lungs still breathing

faintly on this earth. The rest
in their sequence, like birth spaces,
dead, bones striving for equality
reaching dust as if a race and tape

measured them still. A stile
she will have to cross alone
or a door with the handle too high
tiptoeing to reach the windowsill

and see in through the glass
but not out. Until then
she holds them as an hourglass
holds sand and a rose holds scent.

ALL SAINTS AND THE DAY OF AN OPERATION *for Beth*

By midnight, All Souls, you will be sleeping
the sleep of the drugged, wake in a grey light
and wonder where you are, touch your wound
think the bed lamp is a moon. Above

where no eye can see the saints
have done their handover like a shift
of nursing staff. Supremely confident
white-winged, white-coated who

on earth were often strained and queer
devout in ways that lead to awful consequence
which now they float free from: extreme
to extreme reward. All Souls brings

your breakfast on a tray, the human scope.
Your wound will be dressed, you sit up
marvelling at the ordinary, the complete
that cannot be removed by surgery.

Elizabeth Smither