Cannibalism: It Still Exists

Fifty-five Vietnamese refugees fled to Malaysia on a small fishing boat to escape communist rule in their beloved country following the Vietnam War. During their escape attempt, the captain was shot by the coast guard. The boat and its passengers managed to outrun the coast guard to the open sea, but they had lost the only person who knew the way to Malaysia, the captain.

The men onboard tried to navigate the boat, but after a week, the fuel ran out, and they drifted farther and farther out to sea. Their supply of food and water was gone; people were starving, and some of the elderly were near death. The men managed to produce a small amount of drinking water by boiling salt water, using dispensable wood from the boat to create a small fire near the stern. They also tried to fish but had little success. A month went by and the sold and sick died. At first, the crew threw the dead overboard, but later, out of desperation, they turned to human flesh as a source of food. Some people vomited as they attempted to eat it, while others refused to resort to cannibalism and see the bodies of their loved ones sacrificed for food. Those who did not eat died of starvation, and their bodies in turn became food for others. Human flesh was cut out, washed in salt water, and hung to dry for preservation. The liquids inside the cranium were drunk to quench thirst. The livers, kidneys, hearts, stomachs, and intestines were boiled and eaten.
Five months passed before a whaling vessel discovered the drifting boat, looking like a graveyard of bones. There was only one survivor.

Cannibalism, the act of human beings eating human flesh (Sagan 2), has a long history and continues to hold interest and create controversy. Many books and research reports offer examples of cannibalism, but few scholars have questioned whether it actually was ever practiced anywhere, except in cases of ensuring survival in times of famine or isolation (Askenasy 43-54). Recently, some scholars have tried to understand why people in the West have been so eager to attribute cannibalism to non-Westerners (Barker, Hulme, and Iversen). Cannibalism has long been a part of American popular culture. For example, Mark Twain’s “Cannibalism in the Cars” tells a humorous story about cannibalism by well-to-do travelers on a train stranded in a snowstorm, and cannibalism is still a popular subject for jokes (“Cannibalism Jokes”).

If we assume that there is some truth to the reports about cannibalism, how can we understand this concept? Cannibalism can be broken down into 2 main categories: exocannibalism, the eating of outsiders or foreigners, and endocannibalism, the eating of members of one’s own social group (Shipman 70). Within these categories are several functional types of cannibalism, three of the most common are survival cannibalism, dietary cannibalism, and religious and ritual cannibalism.

Survival cannibalism occurs when people trapped without food have to decide “whether to starve or to eat fellow humans” (Shipman 70). In the case of the Vietnamese refugees, the crew and the passengers on the boat ate human flesh to stay alive. They did not kill people to get human flesh for nourishment but instead waited until the people had died. Even after human carcasses were sacrificed for food, the boat people ate only
enough to survive. Another case of survival cannibalism occurred in 1945, when General Douglas MacArthur’s forces cut supply lines to Japanese troops stationed in the Pacific Islands. In one incident, Japanese troops were reported to have sacrificed the Arapesh people of northeastern New Guinea for food on order to avoid death by starvation (Tuzin 63). The most famous example of survival cannibalism is American history comes from the diaries, letters, and interviews of the survivors of the California-bound Donner Party, who in the winter of 1846 were snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Mountains for 5 months. Thirty-five of the 87 adults and children died, and some of them were eaten (Hart 116-117; Johnson).

Unlike survival cannibalism, in which human flesh is eaten as a last resort after a person has died, in dietary cannibalism humans are purchased or trapped for food and then eaten as a part of the culture’s traditions. In addition, survival cannibalism often involves people eating other people of the same origins, whereas dietary cannibalism usually involves eating foreigners.

In the Miyanmin society of the west Sepik interior of Papua, New Guinea, villagers do not value human life over that of pigs or marsupials because human flesh is part of their normal diet (Poole 7). The Miyanmin people observe no difference in “gender, kinship, ritual status, and bodily substance”; they eat anyone, even their own dead. In this respect, then, they practice both endocannibalism and exocannibalism; and to ensure a constant supply of human flesh for food, they raid neighboring tribes and drag their victims back to their village to be eaten (Poole 11). Perhaps, in the history of this society, there was a time a shortage of wild game to be hunted for food, and because people were more plentiful than fish, deer, rabbits, pigs, or cows, survival cannibalism
was adopted as a last resort. Then, as their culture developed, the Miyanmin may have retained the practice of dietary cannibalism, which has endured as a part of their culture.

Similar to the Miyanmin, the people of the Leopard and Alligator societies of South America eat human flesh as part of their cultural tradition. Practicing dietary exocannibalism, the Leopard people hunt in groups, with one member wearing the skin of a leopard to conceal the face. They ambush their victims on the forest and carry their victims back to their village to be eaten. The Alligator people also hunt in groups, but they hide themselves under a canoelike submarine that resembles an alligator, then swim close to a fisherman’s or trader’s canoe to overturn it and catch their victim (MacCormack 54).

Religious or ritual cannibalism is different from survival and dietary cannibalism in that it has a ceremonial purpose rather than one of nourishment. Sometimes only a single victim is sacrificed for a ritual, while at other times many are sacrificed. For example, the Bangala tribe of the Congo River in Central Africa honors a deceased chief or leader by purchasing, sacrificing, and feasting on slaves (Sagan 53). The number of slaves sacrificed is determined by how highly the tribe revered the deceased leader.

Ritual cannibalism among South American Indians often serves as revenge for the dead. Like the Babgalas, some South American Tribes kill their victims to be served as part of funeral rituals, with human sacrifice denoting that the deceased was held in high honor. Also, like the Bangalas, these tribes use outsiders as victims. Unlike the Bangalas however, the Indians sacrifice only 1 victim instead of many in a single ritual. For example, when a warrior of a tribe was killed in battle, the family of the warrior forces a victim to take the identity of the warrior. The family adorns the victim with the deceased
warrior’s belongings and may even force him to marry the deceased warrior’s wives. But once the family believes the victim has assumed the spiritual identity of the deceased warrior, the family kills him. The children in the tribe soak their hands in the victim’s blood to symbolize their revenge of the warrior’s death. Elderly women of the tribe drink the victim’s blood and then cut up his body for roasting and eating (Sagan 53-54). The people of the tribe believe that by sacrificing the victim, they have avenged the death of the warrior and the soul of the deceased can rest in peace.

In the villages of certain African tribes, only a small part of a dead body is used in ritual cannibalism. In these tribes, where the childbearing capacity of women is highly valued, women are obligated to eat a small, raw fragments of genital parts during fertility rites. Elders of the tribe supervise this ritual to ensure that the women will be fertile. In the Bimin-Kuskusmin tribe, for instance, a widow eats a small, raw fragment of flesh from the penis of her deceased husband on order to enhance her future fertility and reproductive capacity. Similarly, a widower may eat a raw fragment of flesh from his wife’s vulva along with a piece of her bone marrow. By eating her flesh, he hopes to strengthen the fertility of his daughters borne by his dead wife, and by eating her bone marrow, he honors her reproductive capacity. Also, when an elder women dies, her uterus and the interior parts of her vagina are eaten by other women who hope to benefit from her reproductive power (Poole 16-17).

Members of developed societies in general practice none of these forms of cannibalism, with the occasional exception of survival cannibalism when the only alternative is starvation. It is possible, however, that our distant-past ancestors were cannibals who through the eons turned away from the practice. We are, after all,
descended from the same ancestors as the Miyanamin, the Alligator, and the Leopard people, and survival cannibalism shows that people are capable of eating human flesh when they have no other choice.
Works Cited


Essay #2 Workshop Worksheet

MLA FORMAT check format and circle any errors and questions for the author. Does it meet the length requirement?

INTRODUCTION Which 1/6 intros does the author use? Suggestions?

STRONG THESIS What is the thesis? How can the thesis be more specific, clear, and/or arguable?

SENSORY DESCRIPTION Circle your favorite description. Mark in the text where more description would help the reader.

SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION Do not make corrections. You can circle or underline areas that lack clarity.

PARAGRAPHS one idea per paragraph. Write an S next to each Statement. If the paragraph lacks an S, make a note. Underline any Es that do not support the S.

REFUTATION Does the refutation address your objections or objections you thought of while reading? If it does not, what other reader concerns should the writer consider? Does the writer’s response seem reasonable, logical, and in support of the reader? Write the objection and the reply here.

WORD mark any words that distract the reader, are the wrong word, or could provide more specifics. Write suggestions here.

CONCLUSION does not sum up. Which 1/5 conclusions does the author use? Suggestions.

CAREFUL PROOFREADING A second pair of eyes helps. Gently mark any errors or questions.

RESPONS TO THE PROMPT Did the writer leave anything out that he/she needs to add? Did he or she respond to the whole prompt? Did she/he include something extra, off topic, or outside the essay’s focus?

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT Do you, as the reader, understand the concept? Are there any places in the explanation or definition where you would like more clarity? Write 1 thing you learned or 1 thing you would like more information about.
# Essay #2 Evaluation

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**ESSAY # 2 GRADE**