

In Defense of Cannibalism

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I

In the Aztec Empire before colonization, during the festival celebrating the Spring Equinox, a captured slave would be flayed alive.¹ His skin, detached from his body, was worn by an Aztec priest in the rite of *neteotquiliztli*, in which he became a living embodiment of Xipe Totec, the Flayed Lord. In the months leading up to the slave's sacrifice, he was also recognized as the living image (*ixiptla*) of Xipe Totec. The skin would be cast off after 20 days, and it was believed to carry magical powers. His body would be dismembered and shared amongst the community.²

Xipe Totec was a fertility god. He was a representation of the life cycle of the maize plant – the single most important staple of the Mesoamerican diet, and the substance from which the Gods made human beings in the epic *Popol Vuh*.³ The flaying represented husking of the corn, and thus the regeneration of the fields.⁴ This association between human flesh and corn was taken literally. In the traditional dish *pozolli*, the ancestor to the modern *pozole*, white hominy was mixed in broth with human flesh.⁵ Dogs raised for food were fattened with corn, to balance the exchange between the dogs and humans.⁶ In indigenous Mesoamerican religion, dogs had religious significance as psychopomps who carried their masters to the underworld. As a sacred animal, it was absolutely imperative to give them proper respect and rites before slaughter. Sacred sacrifice was a major facet of the Mesoamerican worldview that permeated every aspect of their society.⁷

As a fertility god, Xipe Totec also had a sexual nature and power. The flayed skin had a secondary association as a symbol of the foreskin, pulled back ("cast off") during sexual intercourse. Similar associations existed in other rituals involving human sacrifice, as sacred war between city-states (*xochiyaoyotl*, literally flower-wars) were seen as a sort of sex or intercourse. Sacrificial victims gained in these wars were seen as "children."⁸

II

225 years before the founding of the Aztec Triple Alliance in 1325, the foreskin of Jesus Christ was allegedly bought in Israel by Baldwin I, a king of the Crusader State in Jerusalem. Like the phallic skin of the Flayed Lord, the Holy Prepuce was believed to carry a variety of magic powers. It even had miracles attributed to it, such as causing three drops of blood to materialize on a white sheet.⁹ This particular Holy Prepuce is perhaps one of the most infamous items in the history of

¹ As was the norm in most of North America, nearly all war between indigenous nations was "bloodless" as it concerned primarily, the capture of enemy soldiers. The Iroquois did this to replace those in their communities who had died, and the Aztec were interested only in obtaining sacrificial victims. This greatly contributed to military defeat in wars against European powers.

² There is little evidence to prove that the Aztecs ate the limbs of the victim in this case, but do to Xipe Totec's association with maize and with the fact it was far from a taboo activity, it is likely.

³ For general purposes, I recommend Michael Bazzett's poetic translation. For an academic and highly-annotated version, I recommend Allen J. Christenson's exact translation.

⁴ See *The Life-cycle of a Tezcatlipoca Ixiptla; the Rendering of Teotl*, 2005

⁵ Bernardino de Sahagún records this in *General History of the Things of New Spain*.

⁶ See *Histories of Maize in Mesoamerica: Multidisciplinary Approaches*. Also, note the many "fattened dog" effigies depicted eating corn cobs found near Colima, MX.

⁷ See, again, the *Popol Vuh*, as in Footnote 3.

⁸ See *The Life-cycle of a Tezcatlipoca Ixiptla; the Rendering of Teotl*, 2005

⁹ See *God's Doodle: The Life and Times of the Penis*.

the relic trade save the Shroud of Turin, but it is far from a lone example. There were at least 18 different churches that claimed to own a relic of the holy foreskin and far more claimed other relics of Jesus or other holy persons. The Second Council of Nicaea, held in 787, decreed in its 7th canon:

Relics are to be placed in all churches: no church is to be consecrated without relics.

Relics were important in an economic sense as well: they brought pilgrims to the community surrounding the church, who needed a place to rest and to be fed; and offerings left at the altars provided a direct source of income for the clergy. Despite being specifically prohibited in the 10th century, the relic trade created an industry out of human bodies. Though not the physical consumption of human beings, the cannibalism of the relic trade involved consumption in a symbolic or mediated sense.

The chief form of man-eating in the west attempted to hide or shroud the ghastly, but the essential, aspect of it by alienating it as far as possible. From the 16th century to the 20th, human fat was used as a salve or ointment, originally as *Axungia hominis*, and in the modern period as *Humanol*. Other products derived from human body parts included suspensions of human skull in alcohol, and in art, Egyptian mummies ground into paint, mummy brown.¹⁰

Despite being ubiquitous in Europe, cannibalism slowly developed as a taboo colored by colonial attitudes towards natives. Even the word "cannibal" is a corruption of Carib, the name of a people indigenous to the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola. Practices of human sacrifice and consumption contributed to a colonial mythos of the savage, of the uncivilized. The civilized mode of slaughter seeks to alienate, as far as possible, the source of food from its actual being. It is a sort of inversion of the eucharist. Under transubstantiation, on one hand, the substance of the wafer remains unchanged whereas the essence is transformed into the literal body of Christ. Slaughter, on the other, leaves the body of a living being unchanged, but its essence is transformed into neutral flesh without personality.

III

As a remnant of the Norman conquest, English preserves a Latinate and a Germanic word for most animals, where the Latinate form generally refers to the food prepared from the meat of the animal, and the Germanic form for the animal "in themselves." Thus, sheep from the Anglo-Saxon *scēap*, but mutton from the French *moton*. Or, cow from the Anglo-Saxon *cū*, but beef from the French *boef*. As the invading Normans became the ruling class, their words for livestock became contrasted with that of the underclass, who reared the animals; thus an odd shadow of the feudal system is cast on the collective memory of English.¹¹

This has created a unique situation in [mainly forcefully-imposed] English-speaking territories, in which children do not always naturally make the connection between meat and animals. For many, this realization is somewhat traumatizing, at least until it can be rendered into apathy, or lies in wait until it becomes a source of cognitive dissonance.

¹⁰ See A Brief History of Medical Cannibalism in Lapham's Quarterly.

¹¹ See Anglo-Saxon and Latinate Words by M. Birch.

The development of civilization was, fundamentally, an alienation from the natural world. As subsistence moved into production, the human became permanently estranged from the nonhuman. Healing and medicinal properties of food, once attributed to an essential force tied to a mystical aspect of the being, now becomes a result of the mere matter it is composed of.

IV

In man-eating, too, the West suffers from this sort of alienation. The human body is a source for many products in wide use today, from foreskin fibroblasts in cosmetics, to the lucrative and sometimes illicit trade in human organs. The sale of human plasma, harvested from living subjects, is a growing industry. With the invention of new forms of biotechnology, even genetic code is bought, sold, and traded; even subpoenaed for use in federal cases. In a less literal sense, human personalities are rendered into data banks raked in from social media, wherein the true profit lies – ads, and algorithms which personalize ads by enhancing them with human essence. Deleuze christens the human-rendered-as-data as the *dividual*, no longer indivisible but able to be split into many parts.¹²

The factory constituted individuals as a single body to the double advantage of the boss who surveyed each element within the mass and the unions who mobilized a mass resistance; but the corporation constantly presents the brashest rivalry as a healthy form of emulation, an excellent motivational force that opposes individuals against one another and runs through each, dividing each within... We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become 'dividuals,' and masses, samples, data, markets, or 'banks.'

In the rite of cannibalism, crystallized as taboo, the "essential" aspect of consumption is preserved, and precisely why it is stigmatized. The human personality is raised as sacred, and thus its slaughter and ingestion lowered as profane. The practice of eating one's family member is unthinkable, but it remains quite common in some parts of, say, Papua New Guinea, even status quo, as a fundamental aspect of mourning. Even in the comparatively rare practice of exocannibalism (eating one outside of one's community, generally as a part of war,) those eating the person are generally said to absorb the power of the "food."

V

To conclude: cannibalism is perhaps the only form of subsistence that retains a certain sacred connection to that which is being eaten. Stigmatized and decried as primitive and uncivilized, it has preserved within its material practice, a primitive and uncivilized worldview in which sustenance is sacred in a certain sense. In all other foods, except perhaps the communion wafer, and only then by circumstance – it has been wrenched from its essence. The ideology of civilization has permeated down to such a degree that even one's methods of subsisting on a mere biological level show its scars: it has no history or being past the atoms which constitute it. They are, in a certain sense, undead: alive, because it provides nutrition and is actively traded, but dead because it is denied the burden of a soul.

¹² See Deleuze's Postscript on the Societies of Control.

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