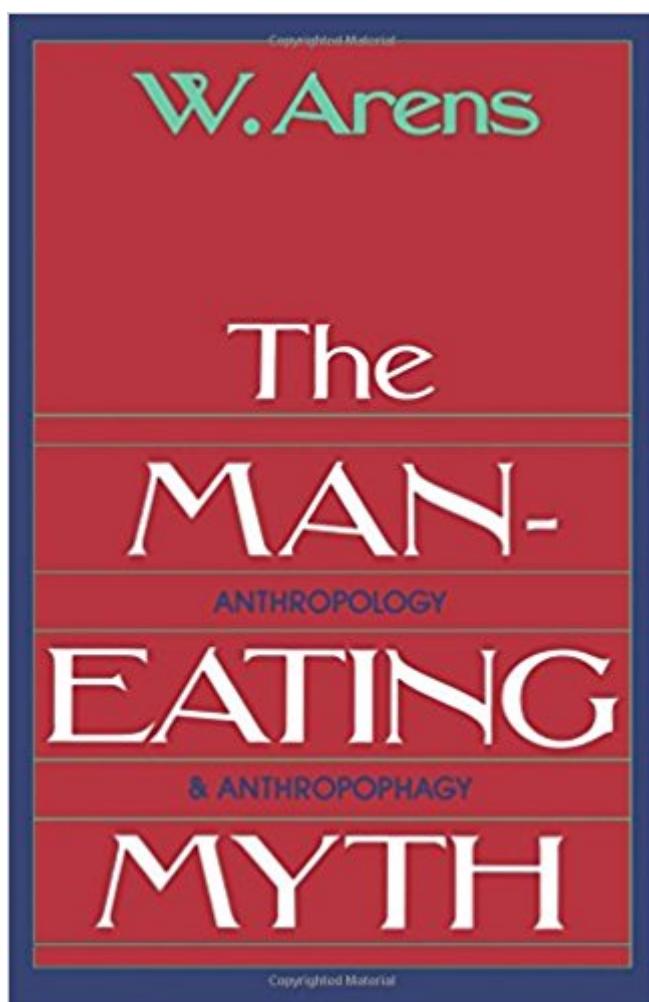


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The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology And Anthropophagy (Oxford University Press Paperback Galaxy Book)



Synopsis

A fascinating and well-researched look into what we really know about cannibalism.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Belief in the existence of cannibalism just beyond the borders of one's own culture is a time-honored, universally accepted notion. The author of this provocative book has meticulously viewed the evidence from all field on the world's classic man-eaters, from the 16th-century Aztecs to contemporary African and New Guinean cultures.

This is a great book. Another one of those books that came out in or around 1980 that mark an tectonic shift within either an academic field or academic thought. Clearly, clearly Arens is right. Early explores set out sure that they would find "cyclopes and cannibals" while they never found anything like the first, the somehow ALWAYS "found" the latter. Of course, they did not. The implication of course that is fascinating is why this taboo? Why did Europeans have and continue to have such a fetish for the cannibal (and incest) as the extreme?

It is a common argument of politically correct rationalists to reduce real cultural difference to ethnocentric Othering by the West. While I cannot speak for Obeyesekere's attempt debunk cannibalism in the Pacific, I will say that Arens argument against widespread cannibalism among

the ancient Tupi-Guarani is completely illegitimate. Arens argues that the only real historical source for Tupi-Guarani cannibalism is Hans Staden (1928), a German seaman allegedly captured by the Tupinamba and kept as a captive to be killed and eaten. Staden escaped his captors, and subsequently published an account of his experiences. Arens argues that Staden's account is bogus, and then argues that other remaining accounts--he lists Andre Thevet, Casas, and Jean de Lery--were simply copied from Staden's original. To argue such a thing is to willfully overlook numerous other sources. Just to give an idea of the sources that Arens did not address, I'll list the bibliography that Forsyth published in *The Journal of Anthropological Research*. There are eyewitness accounts from Jesuit on the following:(1) cannibalism (Anchieta 1933:216; Navarro 1956:182-83, 282)(2) the confiscation of cooked (and preserved) human flesh from the Indians, so that they would not eat it (Anchieta 1957:200; Lourenço 1958:468);(3) the confiscation of bodies from Indians who were about to eat them, or persuading them to bury the bodies rather than eating them (Anchieta 1933:154; Nobrega 1931:92; Blasquez 1957:388; Navarro 1956:282), in one case after the body was already roasted (V. Rodrigues 1956:307-9);(4) the successful rescue of prisoners before they could be killed and eaten (Anchieta 1933:32-33; Lourenço 1958:468; Pereira 1931:288), or, failing this, the attempt to baptize the victim before the execution (Anchieta 1933:155-56; Nobrega 1931:109; Navarro 1956:279; Blasquez 1957:386-88; Fernandes 1931:485), either with the consent of the victim and his executioners or by subterfuge (Anchieta 1933:153; Lourenço 1956:517-18; Correia 1957:67; Blasquez 1957:388);(5) continual complaints about Indians participating in cannibalistic ceremonies after being baptized and promising not to do so (Anchieta 1933:46, 79, 166; 1957:194; Nobrega 1931:106, 157, 160; Brots 1956: 274-75).(6) Tupians contracting smallpox from eating an infected Portuguese soldier (P. Rodrigues 1938:515).Of course, Europeans were hardly unbiased in their depictions of Amerindian cultures. That is not what Arens is arguing. To believe Arens is to believe in a well-organized conspiracy among Jesuits and explorers from different countries over a hundred years to accuse Tupi-Guarani peoples (but not Ge) of cannibalism.

'The Man-eating Myth' was very much a book of its time when it was published in 1979, starting with the faux-common man authorship by 'W. Arens,' as if the professor was just another anonymous cog in the machine.The agenda was to whitewash 'savages' from the charge -- implicitly, the western colonialist charge -- of cannibalism. This was the era when Iron Eyes Cody was the symbol of the idea that Indians lived a life in balance with nature before the evil Europeans arrived with their deadly indoor plumbing.Even in 1979, this approach required a lot of overlooking. The very first

book of reportage, the 'Histories' of Herodotus, included a relation (second-hand, to be sure) of ritual funerary cannibalism. Subsequently, there were plenty of other reports, of varying reliability, of cannibalism. Arens contended these were all made up, that 'cannibal' was a term every group applied to the people 'on the other side of the hill' the way bloggers label everyone they dislike a 'fascist' or a 'racist.' There was a grain of truth, a small one, in this assertion. People do unfairly label outgroups cannibals. But it was a logical error to assert, as Arens did, that because some claims of cannibalism were fake, all were. To support his argument, he set a bizarre standard of proof: to be believed, such a charge would have to be validated by a professional anthropologist. The arrogance of this standard was amusing in 1979, embarrassing by the 1990s. Science marches on. Tim White, in 'Prehistoric Cannibalism,' used bones from the Mancos site to develop a rigorous set of standards for assessing whether bones had been processed for food. As it turns out, they have been, throughout the Four Corners area of the American Southwest. The sites prove that, from time to time, the whole population of a village was murdered and eaten. Not merely ritually eaten, as the Polynesians (among others) did to acquire the strength of an enemy, but for nutrition. The Indians went to a lot of trouble to extract the last bit of grease from their meat. What the Mancos site does not tell us is who ate whom, under what circumstances or how often. It is just barely possible that the Mancos and similar sites are unusual examples of emergency (often called survival) cannibalism. If Arens' position is read strictly, it could perhaps be argued that his contention has not been disproven. He admitted, grudgingly, that there were some instances of cannibalism, but he made these out to be exceptional and rare. It's true that the Four Corners sites do not prove regular consumption of human meat, but only because it appears that the eaters ate everybody, leaving no 'stock' to grow and fatten for future meals. Had Arens had a simpler goal, just to debunk a large body of dubious claims of cannibalism, his book would have been unexceptionable. It was his general claims that got attention in the 1980s, and on those, it is Arens who got debunked.

In this controversial work William Arens claims that cannibalism is just a creation of prejudice. According to him there is no evidence supporting the wide-spread belief that cannibalism has been a socially accepted practice in certain cultures. As years have gone by, lots of evidence has surfaced. For most scholars of archaeology and anthropology there is no question about whether anthropophagy has existed or not: All around the world there have been societies in which cannibalism has been a commonplace ritual practice. Many other types of cultural phenomena are supported by far thinner body of evidence. Denial of the existence of cannibalism seems to be a post-colonial psychological coping mechanism -- similar to regularly emerging refusal of the

holocaust. In 90s Arens has had to slighten his strict opinions in order to maintain any academical credibility, although he still has not taken back his claim that there is no systematical, widely practiced cannibalism in any culture -- nor has probably ever been. Arens' arguments are interesting and the book may most certainly open eyes for colonial structures of meaning. However, it should be recognised that the theory is partly outdated.

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