

Item #8

**William Arens, “Cannibals of the Imagination,” *New York Times*, 2 April 1979: A19.**

# Cannibals of the Imagination

By William Arens

The ubiquitous belief in cannibals just beyond the borders of one's culture is time-honored.

In simpler societies, man-eaters were thought to reside in the next valley or farther along the river.

In more advanced societies, cannibals are presumed to inhabit the mysterious lands and times on the fringes of our civilization and history.

It is not surprising, therefore, that recently an anthropologist announced that he had solved the enigma of Aztec sacrifice.

The Aztecs, he argued, sacrificed and then ate their victims as a result of a dietary scarcity of animal protein. Colleagues whom he accused of covering up these facts, unaware that such an enigma existed, responded with the conventional argument that the Aztecs were merely ritual cannibals who consumed bits of human flesh on religious occasions. The matter then subsided into the learned journals.

However, in disputing motivations, no one has seriously considered whether or not the Aztecs were indeed cannibals; this propensity is assumed as an article of faith.

I would argue that if the evidence is reviewed with an open mind, such an assumption is unwarranted.

The record begins with Cortés and a few compatriots who penned their thoughts during or shortly after the conquest of Mexico.

Although Aztec cannibalism is mentioned, it is always a casual aside.

Interestingly, the Aztecs also thought that the Spaniards dined on human flesh, but we learn little of this suspicion since the defeated do not have the opportunity to write the history of their demise.

The crucial point is that none of those immediately involved provided a satisfactory description of the deed, nor did they dwell on the theme.

This is not to deny that the Aztecs engaged in human sacrifice, as attested to by the still-preserved skull racks, but it is presumption to conclude that the missing remains were eaten.

Fittingly, this leap of faith and thus the present foundation for the Aztec reputation was established by two Spanish friars born after the conquest. They set about to reconstruct traditional Aztec culture, with the intent of stamping out its vestiges in the process of converting the survivors to Christianity.

From them we now learn that the natives were once idolators, sodomists and cannibals.

In this campaign to conquer their souls, wartime propaganda became historical fact. Furthermore, they provided no first-hand accounts of cannibalism. Yet, this was to matter little in the elaboration of the idea.

By the 19th century, W. H. Prescott could write of elegant Aztec cannibal-



An Aztec prisoner to be sacrificed. Illustration by Keith Henderson from "The Conquest of Mexico," by W. H. Prescott

istic banquets, while a contemporary college text describes the purported custom as an "intoxicated orgy of cannibalism." Lacking documentation, the author can portray the scene according to his particular fancy.

Given the quality of this literature, the perplexing issue is not why the Aztecs were cannibals but how anthropologists could find themselves in their present intellectual position. Therein lies the subtle enigma, for the scholars have abandoned scholarship in order to maintain the prejudices of former military and spiritual conquerors.

Resolving this involves recognizing that our culture has at one time or another labeled almost every other as cannibalistic.

Anthropologists are themselves products of this tradition, and continue to proclaim the message in public.

But another more important element exists: These specialists have had the opportunity to refute this notion but instead have conferred on it further respectability.

Every generation of anthropologists has sharpened its theoretical thinking on the remnants of man-eaters, for without cannibals, they would find themselves in much the same position as the inquisitors of an earlier era who quickly exhausted the supply of mortal heretics and therefore had to conjure up mystical ones on broomsticks.

I could not be so forthright on this matter if I had ever encountered in

person or in print a single anthropologist who had personally witnessed the act.

There is no good evidence in all of the vast commentary by both layman and professional to permit the conclusion that cannibalism has ever existed as an accepted custom in any society. Cannibalism under ultimate survival conditions or on the part of aberrant individuals has everywhere made an appearance but it is another matter to conclude this behavior has ever been condoned.

The idea of cannibalism is pervasive, but the act is always just beyond our vision.

Since the ancient Aztecs are considered to be the best-documented example of a cannibalistic society, the counter-argument proposed here suggests that a re-evaluation of our self-satisfying vision of the non-Western world is in order.

This dismal suspicion that others are man-eaters, and thus our moral and cultural inferiors, rather than the imagined deed itself, deserves our legitimate concern.

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