



Cannibalism Reconsidered: Responses to Marshall Sahlins (AT 19,3)

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CANNIBALISM RECONSIDERED

Responses to Marshall Sahlins (AT 19,3)

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Sahlins and to state my own position in respect of both cannibalism and anthropophagy on the basis of my published articles and my forthcoming book, *Cannibal talk: Dialogical misunderstandings in the South Seas*.

1. In my recent Huxley lecture (July 2003) I pointed out that one should reserve the term 'cannibalism' for the 'dread of the Other' – found everywhere, but obsessively so in the European past and present, and indicating what I have earlier called 'the dark side of being human' (Obeyesekere 1992: 630). The use of the label 'cannibalism', I added, 'has inhibited our understanding of the multiple "forms of anthropophagy" in the cross-cultural record.' In my forthcoming book I make the assumption that in three Polynesian societies – Tonga, Hawai'i and Tahiti – there occurred only a symbolic eating of the sacrificial victim unlike the well-regulated consumption of the victim in New Zealand, Marquesas and Fiji. Far from denying anthropophagy, my work affirms it and, unlike Sahlins, I discuss its varying forms even in Polynesia – for example, the killing and consumption of Europeans following the colonial intrusion, and the new weaponry that produced a large number of chiefly corpses for consumption that in turn resulted in the expansion of the 'consubstantial community' (ibid: 652-654). Further, the Maori case illustrates how in the colonial situation both Europeans and natives were involved in mass anthropophagy, with the corpses cooked in the ship's cauldron (cf. McNab 1926:578-603).¹ The texts that Sahlins cites must be seen in the context of the colonial intrusion and, for Fiji, in relation to the rise of Mbau after 1808, when traders and settlers brought in the new weapons and expertise which resulted in drastic political changes in Fiji, a fact noted even by colonial historians.

2. Consider the 32 cases of cannibalism recorded by Mrs Wallis, one of Sahlins' authorities who, apparently, was a 'god' to Fijians (Wallis 1851: 47). Rereading 21 of these cases I find mostly snippets of information emanating from gossip, rumour and hearsay, many from times past – such as the anecdote Wallis collected from Reverend Cross, according to which some people in Rewa 'were placed alive on coals of fire, roasted, and then devoured by fiends in human shape' (ibid.: 31). Or this one which came via Reverend Hunt: 'The body of Wilson and his woman were taken ashore, where they were cooked and eaten; the lives of the children were spared that they might be fattened before they should be killed' (ibid.: 47). I doubt one could use missionary texts for reconstituting the past of Fijian anthropophagy, as Sahlins does, though they could be used to illuminate 'cannibal talk'. None of these texts exhibit the depth and sympathy of early French writers in

Brazil like André Thevet and Jean de Léry, although these also had their limitations, as Frank Lestringant nicely shows (Lestringant 1997, de Léry 1990).

3. Sailors and settlers who arrived long before the missions supply the details lacking in the missionary accounts. Consider my thoroughgoing 'deconstructive-restorative' study of the most detailed record we have of a cannibal feast in Fiji, made by Peter Dillon in 1813 and taken as truth by virtually every scholar of Fiji, including the admirable Mrs Wallis and J.W. Davidson, the notable Pacific historian (Dillon 1829, Wallis 1851, Davidson 1975). I not only demonstrate that Dillon fabricated the cannibal feast but also adduce Dillon's motivation to invent 'narratives of the self' (Obeyesekere 2001). Deconstructing Dillon took three months of hard work in the Australian National Library; I wanted to perform a similar operation in respect of eyewitness William Lockerby (1925) but I could trace neither the original documents nor Lockerby's living relatives.

4. Sahlins conveniently takes texts at face value and *denies* the significance of contemporary post-structuralism and post-colonial theory for the analysis of 'cannibal' texts. But surely he must justify using texts, some written 40 years after the European intervention, for the substance and incidence (though not the fact) of sacrificial anthropophagy in pre-colonial times. 'Cannibal talk', or the *representation* of Polynesian anthropophagy in colonial texts, is what concerns me most. I can live with Fijian conspicuous anthropophagy in colonial times but I question Sahlins's positivistic preoccupation with gross numbers of corpses noted by his authorities as if they add up to a total when, often enough, one source simply repeats others and the numbers themselves cannot be uncritically accepted.

5. Sahlins belatedly admits that perhaps 'Endicott indeed did not see the event' and that his article on the Fijian cannibal feast was stolen from a fellow sailor, Henry Fowler (Sahlins, note 3). But what are the implications of this statement? If Endicott invented events and stole information from his colleagues, then why not others? Sahlins says that Endicott's narrative is confirmed by his fellow sailors, whereas I think that 'confirmation' of one text by another might mean that the one borrowed from the other, or that both were drawing from a common circulating pool of 'cannibal talk.' I believe I can demonstrate this for Oliver (1848), though not for Henry Fowler whom I have not read.² Further, if the cannibal feast did occur, why was this important event not recorded in Endicott's log, while other events and dates are carefully noted? Sahlins also uses information drawn from *Cannibal Jack* by John Diapea, who I show is really a writer of adventure stories, and had already written an unpublished novel entitled *Jack, the cannibal killer* (Obeyesekere 1992). What happens when such contaminated data are used by

Sahlins in his scholarly work (e.g. Sahlins 1983)? Sahlins describes features of Fijian anthropophagy but neglects to mention Polynesian vampirism and children fattened for later consumption, both practices attributed to native populations the world over.

Most of Sahlins' criticisms will be discussed at great length in *Cannibal talk*, but while this might produce another (small) Polynesian war I hope it will not result in a *naturally* maintained controversy, an impossible condition, I think. ●

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1. I deal with this topic extensively in chapter 5 of *Cannibal talk*, entitled, 'The fate of heads: Cannibalism, decapitation and capitalism'.

2. Two editions of Oliver's book appeared, one in 1846 and the other in 1848, but because Oliver died in 1845, both versions were revised and edited by his brother, William Dix, who notes: 'Some extracts from the manuscripts of my brother's shipmates, who kindly submitted them for the purpose, have been interwoven with the original narrative, being transformed into its general style, for resemblance of expression.'

On the authority of a distinguished spokesman for contemporary anthropology, we are supposed to believe that the natives of some far away place were up to the usual no good before we imposed civilization and democracy upon them in the 19th century. I am not convinced. Despite my admiration for much of Professor Sahlins' scholarship, I find this essay to be disingenuous at the start, misleading in the middle, and naïve at the end.

For starters, the 'artificially maintained' controversy is primarily of Sahlins' own making. As I have argued previously (Arens 1979), there is no sure way of knowing if the locals were indeed eating their friends and/or enemies on a customary basis before Europeans conquered them. Despite the inherent rationality of this position, Sahlins refuses to let the matter go and instead seizes on the Fijians. Thus he is very much the source of the controversy he then decries. As he himself admits in a footnote, Endicott may not in fact have been an eyewitness of Fijian cannibalism, nor the author of the text cited. This just about demolishes his entire argument. However, it will keep the controversy alive.

In the middle of his text, arguing his case for contemporary evidence, Sahlins cites, in apparent confirmation of his pro-cannibal position, the careful archeological work of DeGusta (1999 and 2000), who has considered the osteological remains and bioarchaeological material from two presumed anthropophagic sites on Fiji. DeGusta writes in one article: 'the hypothesis of cannibalism at Navatu is supported' (DeGusta 1999:215, emphasis mine). However, in the second article on another suspected Fijian cannibal site, DeGusta writes 'the cannibalism hypothesis is not supported at Vunda' (DeGusta 2000: 76, emphasis mine). Unfortunately, Sahlins fails to indicate to the reader that the latter publication

actually contradicts, rather than supports his argument. We can neither admire his candour here nor, more to the point, accept his blanket conclusion that the Fijians were cannibals.

Finally, at the very end of his piece, Professor Sahlins asks: '...what's an anthropology for?' I would suggest in response, and for this sort of exercise in particular, that our discipline's responsibility is to carefully consider, analyse and interpret the existing texts, especially when it comes to the reports of missionaries, explorers, sailors and their ilk. As I noted above, even our contemporary colleagues can lead us astray at times when it comes to this perplexing topic. Sahlins has employed this critical objective perspective in the past. I would recommend it to him again. ●

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THE AESTHETICS OF BREEDING

A response to Rebecca Cassidy (AT 19,3)

Rebecca Cassidy's engaging history of the racehorse reveals the intrigue behind the theft of Arabian ponies from Turkey and Syria – machinations that have led to an international culture of equine pedigree sex and financial gain on racecourses both East and West. Tales of barter, bribe and collusion underpin the acquisition of the apical equines of present-day Irish, French and English thoroughbred bloodlines stemming from the Byerley Turk (imported from Turkey

1687), and the Darley Arabian and Godolphin Arabian (imported from Syria c.1706 and c.1729), respectively. Beloved animals were frequently taken from their owners for the sake of propagating 'thoroughbred sex' in the racehorse industry. These early horse-stealing activities of the English are now being redressed in racing circles by the multi-million-dollar operations of flat racing owners such as Dubai Crown Prince and United Arab Emirates' Minister of Defence, Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum, whose monopoly on 12 stud farms in Britain and Ireland ensures a hefty financial return to his country.

Cassidy follows a series of detailed equine genealogies to argue that thoroughbred sex is about heredity and money in the commodification of the ultimate thoroughbred stallion bloodline that is passed on to yearlings 'through the male line' (p. 14). So it is striking to learn that, in terms of origins, Darley is 'the most influential sire line of them all' (p.18) although he has yet to produce a significant stallion (p.16, footnote 10). What, then, defines the best bloodline, if not its production of great stallions? By contrast, the Arabian tendency to trace equine genealogies through the dam rather than the stallion offers a greater degree of ambiguity regarding bloodlines and an important point of cultural comparison that could be more fully developed. There are some studs in Ireland, for example, which are private and thus do not enjoy the power and profile of a stallion; mares are taken elsewhere to be covered – yet these studs still boast the progeny and profit of Ascot's top winners. So, what kinds of cross-cultural convergences persist between British and Arabian perspectives of the three great sires?

In sum, Cassidy asserts that 'the ruling families of the modern Middle East are attracted to horse racing and breeding for many of the same reasons as were the English noblemen of the 18th century' (p.18). Certainly, Stubbs' accentuation of equestrian aesthetics in paintings such as Whistlejacket (1762) reflected elite ideals of posture, grace and nobility in 18th-century English high society that still influence contemporary views of equine conformation and beauty. The trainer of Ascot winner Irresistible Jewel, at Moyglare Stud, Co. Kildare, told me: 'We were offered US\$3,000,000 for her but she's a beautiful mare and we wouldn't sell her'. Today, the 'beauty' of the 'entangled' equine and its dynasty is often priceless. However, Stubbs' images also conceal powerful discourses about equine sex and capital gain between England and the Middle East.

Uncovering the relationship between heredity and sex sheds some light on the equine aesthetics of British trainers and wealthy Arab owners. However, as the lucrative exploits of thoroughbred sex are located away from the stable, one might ask what other stakes persist in the nexus of sex, aesthetics and profit in international collaborations on and off the racetrack?

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REFLECTIONS ON ISLAM AND HOMOSEXUALITY

A response to Wim Lunsing (AT19,2)

Wim Lunsing's multi-layered analysis of the assassination of Pim Fortuyn raises a host of significant issues about the precarious position of Islam and the challenges facing Muslim integration not only in the Netherlands, but in the West in general. Very often, Islam is irresponsibly misrepresented and exploited by alarmist mass media and politicians with little or no knowledge of the religion. I imagine that the smiling face of the Bali bomber reacting to his death sentence – spread across the newspapers recently – will further reinforce the stereotype that Islam promotes violence, and is antithetical to Western modernity.

Islam is not monolithic in belief or in practice. Quite apart from the geographical and cultural differences, younger generations of Muslims in the West gradually grow away from their elders in their religious orientation and expression, in response to their wider cultural repertoire that incorporates (not always harmoniously, admittedly) the values of both their culture of origin and their Western homeland. Their religious identity, for instance, is more reflexive, contested and fluid. As Western societies reflect on how to manage relations with Muslim communities in their midst and beyond, rather than further sensationalizing and essentializing Islam, it is the voices of these people that need to be heard much more in all social spheres. Otherwise, the efforts towards mutual understanding currently being made by Muslim and non-Muslim communities will be undermined. I find Jonathan Sacks' *The dignity of difference* (2002, Continuum) and Akbar Ahmed's *Islam under siege* (2003, Polity) particularly helpful in my reflections on how diverse social groups can live within their own domains whilst successfully interacting with others.

On the specific issue of homosexuality, the press and politicians alike have a responsibility not to focus excessively on the censorious stance on homosexuality which is prevalent within the Muslim community. In the midst of uncompromising discourse that constructs homosexuality as a Western disease, there is a small but growing body of alternative voices within the Muslim community that tell a different story. These are progressive voices of reason and open-mindedness. I gathered such voices and narratives in a recently completed research project on British lesbian, gay and bisexual Muslims.¹ The participants, though seriously lacking in theological and social capital at present, work hard to construct safe space to consolidate and extend their presence through, for instance, the establishment of support groups.

In this respect, the work of Al-Fatiha UK, the Safra Project and the Naz Project is particularly significant.² Their stories show that the prejudicial representation of Islam as restrictive of the individual's sexual freedom, and therefore antithetical to a Western culture that increasingly tolerates sexual diversity, is neither helpful nor accurate. Of course there will