Marital exchange and cannibalism

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Abstract

Sexuality and alimentation are related in many ways. In this paper only one of the social aspects of these relations is presented. Cannibal wars and human sacrifice are structurally bound to the rules of marriage in various societies. The comparative study presented is limited to only two very different primitive societies living in completely different ecosystems, showing the various ways in which they articulate their respective solutions to these basic human needs.

Keywords: Cannibalism, marital exchange, Tupi Guarani, Tunguz, Amazonia, Siberia, war, general anthropology, sociology, religion

Słowa kluczowe: kanibalizm, wymiana małżeńska, Tupi Guarani, Tunguzi, Amazonia, Syberia, wojna, antropologia, socjologia, religia

Incest is nice as long as it stays in the family.
(English saying)

I would like to present some remarks concerning a persistent relation between two sets of behaviours that certainly count among the most fundamental in human cultures: marriage rules and cannibalism. As an illustration of these relations, I have selected two culturally separated and isolated groups occupying very different ecosystems. The first one, a group of Amazonian Indians, warlike hunter-gatherers and primitive agriculturists, the Tupi-Guarani. The other, a Siberian group of hunter-gatherers and herders of reindeer, the Tunguz. So that we are dealing here with two very different societies.

1 This paper was inspired by Isabel Combès’s book: La tragédie cannibale chez les Tupi Guarani (Paris 1992), and Kwon Heonik’s paper: Play the bear (“History of Religions”, 1999, vol. 38, no. 4, p. 373–383), which I found interesting to set in parallel, and to which I refer in general.
We will try to see how these two very different cultures manage two sets of apparently very distinct cultural practices as well. On the one hand the rules of kinship and alliance, and on the other, the religious practice of sacrifice in its most perfect form, the human sacrifice for the banquet of communion, a cannibal feast.

It is not really fashionable to compare such distant cultures, but I believe this approach is justified when we try to understand better such universal practices as those taken into consideration here. After all, the aim of anthropology is to look for universals in human behaviours illustrated by the relations between specific examples. Without supposing the universality of man, a general anthropology would lose all justifications. And the best way to establish the fundamental aspects of culture is to cast light on identical or parallel practices among very different ethnic groups.

I am not convinced that the comparison between rites of marriage and the cannibal banquet is very new; I even know that the relations between these two fields of cultural and ritual behaviours have already been noticed and commented on, but this was mainly in an ethnographic or sociological perspective limited to one group. It is therefore possible that a new approach to the problem treated comparatively and structurally will not be completely without interest.

Neither are the arguments used to construct a model here new; they are largely known in ethnology, anthropology, philosophy, the history of religions, and psychology. And this is welcome; at least we are moving in a secure field.

1) The symbolic equivalence between alimentary and sexual consumptions is well established, and there is no use in looking for sophisticated psychological theories, as a simple collection of the expressions used in gastronomic and erotic vocabularies show that collusion perfectly. And this is true in most languages of the world.

2) The vocabulary of hunting is also very often used as a symbolic parallel of sexual approach2. In active and aggressive hunts with spears, arrows, knocking or piercing, the game or prey is feminine. In passive hunts with hooks, nets, traps, the game is a male who enters by his own will and is taken, captured.

3) As the boundary between hunting and war is often unclear, we see that war itself is often an enterprise of general conquest, a fight for domination, the conquest of the land and its women, of one and the other, of both, a violation, trespassing borders and limits, entering the vital sphere of the other, a rape. But here again the conquest is often an illusion when the winner is assimilated physically and culturally by the local population, literally eaten and digested. This is a process in which women play a prominent role.

These well-known and often-described reasons clearly show that the relations between kinship, marital exchange and cannibalism are natural and come under common sense.

2 The most familiar image of it for the Europeans is that of Eros the archer. In America, the deer hunt frequently means an erotic chase. See André Leroi-Gourhan (Les Religions de la Préhistoire Paris 1964) and Annete Leming-Emperaire (La Signification de l’art rupestre paléolithique, Paris 1962) for the sexual interpretation of prehistoric iconography in terms of sexual dichotomy. This parallel is found in a large collection of myth, tales and the medieval literature.