

= The Man @-@ Eating Myth =

The Man @-@ Eating Myth : Anthropology and Anthropophagy is an influential anthropological study of socially sanctioned cultural cannibalism across the world , which casts a critical perspective on the existence of such practices . It was authored by the American anthropologist William Arens of Stony Brook University , New York and first published by Oxford University Press in 1979 .

Arens ' primary hypothesis is that despite claims made by western explorers and anthropologists since the 15th century , there is no firm , substantiable evidence for the socially accepted practice of cannibalism anywhere in the world , at any time in history . Dismissing claims of cultural cannibalism made against the Carib and Aztec peoples by invading Spanish colonialists , he tackles 19th and 20th century claims regarding socially acceptable cannibalism in Sub @-@ Saharan Africa and New Guinea . Turning to prehistory , he critiques archaeological claims to have discovered evidence for such practices in Europe and North America . In the second half of the work , Arens puts forward his argument that an erroneous belief in " others " who commit socially sanctioned cannibalism is a global phenomenon . He proceeds to chastise the anthropological community for perpetuating the " Man @-@ Eating Myth " , suggesting reasons as to why they have done so .

The Man @-@ Eating Myth was widely reviewed in academic journals and also attracted attention from mainstream press . Views were mixed , with most reviewers highlighting the intentionally provocative nature of the work . Critics charged Arens with constructing straw man arguments and for exaggerating the methodological problems within anthropology . Although influential , in ensuing decades , increasing archaeological study of cannibalism led many to dismiss Arens ' hypothesis .

= = Background = =

William Arens undertook the research for his PhD in Tanzania , Eastern Africa . After beginning his fieldwork in a rural community there in 1968 , he discovered that the locals referred to him as mchinja @-@ chinja , a Swahili term meaning " blood @-@ sucker " . This was due to a widespread belief in the community that Europeans would collect the blood of Africans whom they killed , convert it into red pills , and consume it . He would note that by the time he left the community a year @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half later , most of the locals still continued to believe this myth .

In the preface to The Man @-@ Eating Myth , Arens notes that he was first inspired to begin a fuller investigation of cannibalism while teaching an introductory course on anthropology at Stony Brook University , New York . One student asked him why he focused his teaching on such topics as kinship , politics and economics rather than the more " exotic " subjects of witchcraft , fieldwork experiences and cannibalism . Arens concurred that these latter topics would interest his students to a greater extent than those which he was then lecturing on , and so undertook an investigation into the prior accounts of cannibalism in the anthropological record .

As he began to read up on the written accounts of cultural cannibalism , he was struck by inconsistencies and other problems in these tales . In search of reliable accounts from anthropologists who had witnessed the practice of cultural cannibalism first @-@ hand , he placed an advertisement in the newsletter of the American Anthropological Association , but again failed to come up with any first @-@ hand documented cases . Prior to its publication , rumors had circulated in the anthropological community that Arens was putting together a book that would challenge the concept of cultural cannibalism .

= = Synopsis = =

In chapter one , " The Nature of Anthropology and Anthropophagy " , Arens discusses the study of anthropophagy , or cannibalism , within the anthropological discipline . Noting that anthropologists have widely taken it for granted that there are societies who socially sanction cannibalism , he nevertheless states that there is no " adequate documentation " for such practices anywhere in the world . In the second part of the chapter , he explores several first @-@ hand accounts of cannibalism and highlights their implausible and inaccurate nature . Beginning with the German

Hans Staden 's claims to have encountered socially sanctioned cannibalism among the Tupinambá people of South America in the 1550s , Arens illustrates a number of logical contradictions in Staden 's account , and highlights the dubious nature of the text . The anthropologist then moved on to the 19th @-@ century accounts of widespread socially approved cannibalism among the Polynesian people of Rarotonga in the Cook Islands provided by Ta 'unga , a Polynesian native who had been converted to Christianity and wrote for the London Missionary Society ; Arens again highlights a number of inconsistencies and logical impossibilities in Ta 'unga 's claims .

The second chapter , entitled " The Classic Man @-@ Eaters " , explores the accounts of cannibalism produced by European colonialists and travellers in the Americas during the Early Modern era . It begins by documenting the Spanish interaction with the Carib people of the Lesser Antilles , first begun by Christopher Columbus and his men in the 1490s . Columbus noted that the Caribs had been described as cannibals by the neighbouring Arawak people of the West Indies , but was initially sceptical about such claims himself . Arens highlights that it was only later , when Columbus began to oversee largescale colonization and pacification of Carib lands , that he began to assert that they were cannibals , in order to legitimize his cause . Arens then proceeds to note that the Spanish government only permitted the enslavement of cannibals in the Caribbean , leading European colonists to increasingly label the indigenous peoples as cannibalistic in order to increase their economic power . Following on from this , Arens goes on to critique the longstanding claims that the Aztec people of Mexico were cannibals ; noting that while the early Spanish accounts of the Aztecs include first @-@ hand descriptions of human sacrifice , he highlights that none of these Spanish observers actually witnessed cannibalism , despite the claims that were later made asserting the cannibalistic nature of Aztec religion . In contrast , Arens argues that the Aztecs found the idea of cannibalism ? even in survival conditions ? socially reprehensible , and believed that some of their neighbouring peoples were guilty of it .

Chapter three , " The Contemporary Man @-@ Eaters " explores the claims made for socially sanctioned cannibalism in the 20th century , with a particular focus on Sub @-@ Saharan Africa and New Guinea . Regarding the former , Arens discusses E. E. Evans @-@ Pritchard 's work in disproving that the Azande people were cannibalistic , before arguing that the stories of socially accepted cannibalism in the " Dark Continent " were based largely on misunderstandings and the sensationalist claims of European travellers like Henry Morton Stanley , and that there was no reputable first @-@ hand accounts of such a practice anywhere in Africa . Instead , he notes that many African societies found cannibalism to be a reprehensible anti @-@ social activity that was associated with witchcraft , drawing comparisons with the Early Modern European witch hunt . Moving on to look at claims for cannibalism in New Guinea made by anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Ronald Berndt , he notes that none of them ever actually came across any evidence of the practice themselves , before going on to critique claims that cannibalism was the cause of the kuru outbreak among the New Guinean Fore people in the mid 20th century .

In the fourth chapter , entitled " The Prehistoric World of Anthropophagy " , Arens deals with archaeological arguments for socially approved cannibalism in European and North American prehistory . He argues that many early archaeologists , in viewing prehistoric societies as " primitive " and " savage " , expected to find widespread evidence of cannibalism within the archaeological record , just as social anthropologists were claiming that the practice was widespread in recently documented " primitive " , " savage " societies . He critiques various claims that broken bones represent evidence of cannibalism , both in Iron Age Yorkshire and in the case of Peking Man , maintaining that these breakages could represent many different things rather than cannibalism . He then moves on to look at North American examples , including those from the Pueblo period in the Southwestern United States and among the Iroquois in the country 's northeast , in both instances critiquing an interpretation of socially sanctioned cannibalism .

The penultimate chapter , " The Mythical World of Anthropophagy " , consists of Arens ' argument that all human groups have been accused of socially accepted cannibalism at one point in time , and that these cannibals are often usually thought of as " others " , being outside of the accuser 's society , and are associated with certain animals because of their " non @-@ human " behaviour . From this , he deduces that the belief in cannibalism is a " universal phenomenon " , and questions

why this should be so . He suggests that societies gain a sense of self @-@ meaning by conjuring the image of an opposite culture that breaks societal taboos . He also describes the manner in which many societies hold origin myths that involve them once being incestuous cannibals before they became civilised , in this way referencing the ideas expressed by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in his Totem and Taboo . He then proceeds to discuss a variety of other related issues , such as the connection between cannibalism and witchcraft , the role of gender and class in cannibal claims , and the role of the Eucharist .

In " The Mythical World of Anthropology " , Arens looks at the manner in which anthropologists have approached the idea of cultural cannibalism . Noting the widespread western idea that cannibals exist " beyond the pale of civilization " , in the land of savagery and primitivism , he argues that anthropologists have taken it upon themselves to explain and rationalize the cannibalism of such " primitives " without first proving that they were cannibalistic to start with . He connects this to the attitude held by many westerners both past and present that they are the bearers of civilization who have helped to put a stop to cannibalism . Challenging and criticizing the anthropological community 's long @-@ term advocacy of what he considers the " Man @-@ Eating Myth " , he draws comparisons with the belief in demonic witchcraft and cannibalism in Europe that led to the witch trials of the Early Modern period , ending his work on a quote from the historian Norman Cohn 's book Europe 's Inner Demons .

= = Main arguments = =

= = = The existence of cultural cannibalism = = =

In The Man @-@ Eating Myth , Arens notes that he was unable to find any form of " adequate documentation " for the existence of socially sanctioned cannibalism in any recorded society . As such , he remained " dubious " that cannibalism has ever existed as an approved social activity . He nevertheless refused to rule out the possibility that it had ever occurred , maintaining that the correct methodological stance was to hold an open mind on the issue , and that it would be impossible to conclusively state that no society throughout human history has ever culturally sanctioned cannibalism . From this definition of " cultural cannibalism " he excludes those instances where people have resorted to cannibalism under survival conditions , or where individuals have committed cannibalism as an anti @-@ social activity that is condemned by the rest of their community .

= = = The universal belief in cultural cannibalism = = =

Arens considers the belief in cannibalism to be a " universal phenomenon " that has been exhibited in all inhabited regions of the world . He expresses his view that " all cultures , subcultures , religions , sects , secret societies and every other possible human association have been labeled anthropophagic by someone . " He notes that accusations of socially sanctioned cannibalism in a society typically arise from an alternative society with whom they are often in conflict . As evidence , he notes that pagan Romans labelled the early Christians as cannibals , despite the lack of any evidence for this , and subsequently Christians in Medieval Europe labelled Jews as cannibals , again without any corroborating evidence .

He argues that across the world , cannibals are viewed as non @-@ human entities , committing acts that no human would ordinarily perpetrate . In this way they were akin to various non @-@ human species of animal , and Arens notes that in some societies , cannibals are believed to physically transform into different species in order to kill and consume humans .

Arens proceeds to ponder the question as to why societies across the world believe that other , exotic societies exhibit cannibalism . He notes that the development of a " collective prejudice " against a foreign entity provides meaning for the group by conjuring up an opposite who commit social taboos . He also suggests that one society 's belief that a foreign society is cannibalistic might arise from an inability to differentiate between the latter 's conceptions of the natural and the

supernatural . As evidence , he asserts that rumors that the Indigenous Americans of Northeastern Canada were cannibals arose when foreign societies learned of their folkloric beliefs in man @-@ eating giants who lived in the wilderness and conflated this fantasy with reality .

= = = The anthropological approach to cultural cannibalism = = =

Arens ' third primary argument is that ever since the development of the discipline , the anthropological community have continually perpetuated the " Man @-@ Eating Myth " that cultural cannibalism was widespread across the world . In this way , he sees anthropologists as following in the path of Christian friars from the Early Modern period who asserted the existence of cannibalism " beyond the pale of civilization " , in societies that are either historically or geographically distinct to western culture . He furthermore argues that both Christian proselytizers and academic anthropologists have sought to accuse non @-@ western , non @-@ Christian peoples of cultural cannibalism in order to then explain and rationalize their " savage " ways ; in doing so , he argues , they continue to portray the Christian west as a civilizing influence on the world that suits their own socio @-@ political agendas . In this way , Arens feels that the " Man @-@ Eating Myth " furthers the " we @-@ they " dichotomy between westerners and non @-@ westerners , and has indirectly lent some justification for the western exploitation of " savage " non @-@ western peoples .

He does not believe that there was any conscious academic conspiracy to spread the claims of cultural cannibalism , instead believing that they have arisen as a result of poor methodologies that have been used in this area , namely a lack of properly scrutinizing sources . He furthermore suggests that anthropologists have failed to tackle this issue because ? while novel ideas are certainly welcomed ? they feared that by criticising long @-@ held core assumptions , they would be upsetting the established status quo within the discipline , and would ultimately tarnish the reputation of anthropology itself by suggesting that it had made major errors .

= = Reception = =

= = = Academic reviews = = =

The Man @-@ Eating Myth was reviewed by Ivan Brady for the American Anthropologist journal . He noted that the framework for Arens ' scepticism was not coherent and was never spelled out explicitly in the text , even if it could be deduced from reading the entirety of the work . Brady sees this framework as an " unsophisticated " version of positivism and naturalism , an approach that he laments was becoming increasingly popular in anthropology . Casting a critical eye over Arens ' scepticism , he admits to being perplexed as to why only " direct observation " will do as evidence , pondering whether Arens would accept anything short of affidavits by practicing cannibals as evidence for the practice . Brady notes that there are other activities in the world that surely go on ? such as masturbation in monasteries and homosexual activity in the armed forces ? but that these would be hidden by a veil of secrecy and therefore difficult to observe directly , suggesting that the same may be true for cannibalism . Moving on , Brady attacks Arens ' criticism of anthropology , believing that he has constructed a straw man argument by comparing the early accounts of travellers to the later , 20th @-@ century accounts of anthropologists , and lambasts him for portraying himself as an objective figure in the debate . He argues that in cases such as that of the Carib people , the evidence for cannibalism is " indeterminate " , rather than negative , as Arens believes . Concluding his review , Brady admits that he agrees with Arens ' premise that socially accepted cannibalism is not as globally widespread as some anthropologists have suggested , but disagreed that anthropologists have been as " reckless " in their claims as Arens charges them with , and furthermore disagrees with Arens ' suggestion that the cause can be blamed on poor observation standards .

The journal Man published a highly negative review by P. G. Rivière of the University of Oxford . Criticizing what he saw as the " chatty ' Holier @-@ than @-@ Thou ' tone " of the book , Rivière

asserted that at only 160 pages of text , Arens had failed to give sufficient attention to the subject and evidence , instead devoting much of the space to constructing and demolishing straw men arguments . Coming to the defence of those who believe the account of Staden regarding cannibalism among the Tupinambá by arguing that it could indeed reflect the German explorer 's genuine experiences , Rivière notes that Arens has not tackled all of the claims which assert that this South American people committed anthropophagy . Furthermore , he expresses his opinion that Arens ' work has made him reassess the evidence for Tupinambá cannibalism , the existence of which he is now even more thoroughly convinced . Proclaiming it to be both a " bad " and a " dangerous " book , he finally expresses his fear that it might prove to be " the origin of a myth " . Similarly , Shirley Lindenbaum of the New School for Social Research published her highly negative review of Arens ' work in the journal *Ethnohistory* . Casting a critical eye on his claims , she notes that his use of source material was " selective and strangely blinkered " , which detracted from his ideas of " collective prejudice " which she considers valuable . Critiquing his discussion of the Fore people of New Guinea as being littered with inaccuracies , she draws comparisons between cannibalism and sexual activity , noting the latter is also not directly observed by anthropologists but nonetheless undoubtedly goes on . She furthermore expresses surprise that the work was ever designed for a scholarly audience because of its poor levels of accuracy .

James W. Springer of Northern Illinois University reviewed Arens ' book for *Anthropological Quarterly* . He hoped that the book would in part have a positive legacy , in that it might make anthropologists look more closely and critically at their source material , and praised its criticism of the claims regarding Aztec cannibalism . He nevertheless proclaimed that Arens was " almost certainly wrong " , making use of faulty evaluation methods and being excessively critical of any and all claims for cultural cannibalism , failing to prove dishonesty or prejudice on the behalf of Europeans who have claimed evidence for cultural cannibalism . He criticises both Arens ' treatment of Staden 's claims and his discussion of Iroquois cannibalism , claiming that Arens has neglected to mention many Native American first @-@ hand testaments as to the cannibalistic nature of these people . Ultimately , he dismissively asserted that *The Man @-@ Eating Myth* " does not advance our knowledge of cannibalism . " More favourably , R.E. Downs of the University of New Hampshire reviewed the work for *American Ethnologist* . Noting that the book was " provocative " in its thesis , he felt that it was bound to raise many " hackles " , and that it would lead future anthropologists to challenge other long @-@ standing beliefs about non @-@ western " primitive " societies , such as that of widespread incest and promiscuity . Ultimately , he remarked that while many anthropologists might dispute Arens ' ideas , never again could they claim that the existence of cultural cannibalism was an undisputed fact .

The geographer Thomas Krabacher of the University of California undertook a review of *The Man @-@ Eating Myth* for the journal *Human Ecology* . Believing that a critical study of cannibal claims has been long needed , he was nevertheless perturbed that Arens ' work failed to be either comprehensive or objective . Although concurring that reports of cannibalism have been all too readily accepted without being properly scrutinized , Krabacher nonetheless argues that he has used a " careless and selective " approach to the literary sources . He also sees problems in Arens ' approach to the nature of the evidence , stating that the anthropologist has not given sufficient thought to what would constitute reliable testimony in the case of cannibalism . Drawing comparisons with sexual behaviour , he notes that it would not always be possible for a western anthropologist to directly view cannibalism , which would likely be hidden from their view by many practitioners , and that as such , second @-@ hand accounts would have to do . He then critiques Arens ' writing style , believing it to be " contentious and possibly offensive " , and highlighting a number of typological errors .

Khalid Hasan 's review of *The Man @-@ Eating Myth* appeared in the *Third World Quarterly* journal . Considering it to be a " brilliant and well documented " tome , he praised Arens ' " admirable " work and expressed his hope that others would expand on his initial thesis . The German journal *Anthropos* published a largely positive review of Arens ' work by John W. Burton , in which he described it as an " extensive and meticulous " study which was the model of a " fair and reasoned argument " . Supporting Arens ' arguments , he proclaimed that the final chapter should be essential

reading for all anthropologists . P. Van de Velde reviewed the book for the Dutch journal *Anthropologica* . Van de Velde felt that the book contained several weaknesses , for instance Arens did not , he notes , explain how the claim for cultural cannibalism can be successfully refuted . The Dutch scholar also noted that the argument that anthropology focused on examining " non @-@ bourgeoisie " cultures was not new . Ultimately however , Van de Velde considered it to be well written book that offered " good reading " , particularly for students .

= = = Subsequent academic reception = = =

= = = In archaeology = = =

Archaeologist Paola Villa , one of the primary excavators of Fontbrégoua Cave , a Neolithic site in Southeastern France where the team argued for the existence of cannibalism , made reference to Arens ' work in a 1992 paper of his published in the *Evolutionary Anthropology* journal . Villa noted that following the book 's publication , prehistorians always dealt with suspicions of cannibalism with " extreme reluctance and scepticism " .

The English archaeologist Timothy Taylor critically discussed Arens ' work in his book *The Buried Soul : How Humans Invented Death* (2002) . Proclaiming that " there is now overwhelming biological , anthropological and archaeological evidence that cannibalism was once all around us " , he attacked Arens for his blanket and " bizarre " accusations against the concept of cultural anthropophagy . He argued that *The Man @-@ Eating Myth* had become so influential upon publication because it was what a generation of anthropological and archaeological students wanted to hear , not because it represented a coherent argument , citing P.G. Rivière 's negative review in *Man* . Commenting on the situation in archaeology , he felt that following the publication of Arens ' work , archaeologists had ceased to cite cannibalism as an explanation , to the detriment of the discipline itself . Presenting evidence to counter Arens ' claims , Taylor cites the accounts of cannibalism among Pom and Passon , two chimpanzees of Gombe National Park whose anti @-@ social activities were recorded by Jane Goodall , and from this discusses the evolutionary benefits of cannibalism . Proceeding to defend various ethnographic accounts of cultural cannibalism , he argues that this thoroughly disproves the beliefs which " Arensite " anthropologists find it " comfortable or fashionable " to believe . Later in *The Buried Soul* , he proclaims that Arens ' book is pervaded by a " hollow certainty of viscerally insulated inexperience " , and he claims that such a flawed methodology has echoes in the anthropologist Jean La Fontaine 's *Speak of the Devil : Tales of Satanic Abuse in Contemporary England* (1998) ; Taylor himself suggests that multiple claims of the Satanic ritual abuse have been incorrectly dismissed for being considered " improbable " .

Arens ' book was also briefly mentioned by the Scottish archaeologist Ian Armit in his book , *Headhunting and the Body in Iron Age Europe* (2012) . Armit noted that though influential , most anthropologists would " probably " argue that Arens ' wholesale dismissals had gone " too far " . He also saw Arens ' work as symptomatic of a trend within anthropology to neglect the " undesirable " cultural practices of non @-@ western societies .

= = = Press attention = = =

Arens ' book gained attention from the popular press soon after its publication .