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The Anthropophagic Antilles: The Origins of the Term "Cannibal" – An Invention of Christopher Columbus

Abstract

The subject matter of this article concentrates on the origins of the term "cannibal," and attributies its origin to Christopher Columbus' misinterpretation of indigenous Caribbean communication. The research perspective involves a critical analysis of Columbus' Diario, exploring the influence of his skewed portrayal and its impact on the perception of indigenous people. The research material primarily comprises Columbus' writings, with a focus on the narrative shift regarding cannibals and the economic implications of such representations of New World. Additionally, the article endeavours to reconstruct the viewpoint of the indigenous Caribbean people, depicting the Europeans as beings that emerge from a symbolic space and labelled as "cannibals."

Keywords: anthropophagy, cannibalism, Caribbean islands, Christopher Columbus, cynocephali, Grand Khan, Native Americans

Introduction

The term "cannibalism" was coined by Christopher Columbus during his first transatlantic voyage in 1492 and emerged as the result of a linguistic misunderstanding in attempts to communicate with the indigenous people. This article aims to shed light on the formation of the word by examining how it was linked to the first encounter between European voyagers and indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, Taínos. The study will examine the role of linguistic and cognitive discrepancies, as well as the impact of Columbus's limited understanding of the other cultures and his preconceived notions, in shaping narratives about the anthropophagic customs attributed to the people he encountered. This study aims to give a brief overview of the etymology of the word "cannibalism," but also to show the semantic charge that was given to it at its inception.

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In numerous cultures, the act of consuming members of one's own species represents a fundamental boundary of humanity. This phenomenon engenders a widespread and profound fear across the globe and is frequently utilised as an accusation against those living outside the perceived boundaries of "our" world. The subject remains of significant interest, with contemporary scholars investigating the existence of actual anthropophagi, debating on the use of human bodies for medical purposes, and examining practices associated with mourning. Historically, allegations of "cannibalism" have functioned as a tool for manipulation, enabling the pursuit of specific political and economic objectives. Such claims persist in contexts involving individuals, social groups, or entire nations as a means of denigration (Arens 1979). This issue is further addressed by the anthropologist Beth Conklin, who notes:

> Cannibalism is a staple of racist stereotypes, and one of the oldest smear tactics in the game of ethic politics, it is used to accuse one's enemies, or people one wishes to degrade or dominate, of eating human flesh, whether or not there is any truth to the accusation. (Conklin 2001: 3)

Anthropophagy constitutes a discursive practice in inter-community relations, with the fabrication of cannibalistic practices often serving as a justification for conquest, colonialism, proselytism, and extermination (Gałganek 2015: 187). Supporting this perspective, anthropologist William Arens controversially argues that there is no substantive evidence to confirm the practice of cannibalism among any group, suggesting that such narratives are largely fictitious (Arens 1979: 187). Nevertheless, evidence for ritualistic consumption of human flesh exists, as demonstrated by the study of kuru (Lévi-Strauss [1952] [2016] 2018: 83–89). A meticulous analysis of Columbus's diaries provides insight into how these early accusations were generalised to encompass all indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Methodology

The reconstruction of the process of creation of the term "cannibalism" is based on the analysis of early accounts of the meetings between Columbus and the Taíno people. The circumstances of the word's origin are quite complex. It is worthwhile to examine these writings more closely to better understand the context. The main text used in this article is his diary (*diario de a bordo*) from the first expedition. The edition containing both a transcription of the Spanish source text and its English translation is by Oliver Dunn and James Kelley (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989). Columbus's practice of keeping a detailed ship's log and leaving behind many other writings (letters, accounts, complaints, and a semi-theological treatise) is rather exceptional compared to voyagers of his era. Other sailors usually left only scarce written records, in some cases not even a signature (Sale 1990: 19).

However, virtually none of Columbus's writings have survived in the original form – only second or third-hand copies of texts are available. The original version of journals has also been lost – only transcriptions of abstracts by copyists who were not always faithful are available today (Keegan 1996: 180). Additionally, it should be remembered that even if the copies were made accurately, their content may not have faithfully reflected reality, as Columbus's main motive for writing was to impress the Spanish rulers, which is evident in his accounts. For this reason, some researchers believe that none of the writings attributed to the explorer can be considered fully reliable (Larner 1988: 8). Consequently, analysing his records, as argued by Peter Hulme, is like a "leap into the unknown" (Hulme 1992: 18). As Margarita Zamora points out, these documents should be read with even greater critical scrutiny (Zamora 1993: 94).

The writings of the sailor that have survived to the present day are an inseparable mixture of fact and fiction. These materials began to function as the original, foundational discourse of "Oriental civilization" and "savagery" in colonial literature and became "the first tale of European beginnings in America" (Hulme 1992: 17–18). In this view, the focus of the analysis shifts from historical circumstances to the narrative and discursive strategies within the story. Read in this way, the diary provides a lens through which to examine the construction of colonial ideas and concepts – Columbus's descriptions of the inhabitants and nature of the New World should be seen not as mere geographical accounts, but as elements of a literary work that reflect the emerging European perceptions of the Other. This perspective allows to see Columbus not simply as the "discoverer of America," but as one of its "inventors," the initial author of the colonial narratives that shaped European ideas about the New World.

Old Monsters in the New World

In this article, it is important to provide a brief explanation of the meaning of two key terms: anthropophagy and cannibalism. Anthropophagy, derived from the Greek word meaning "eating humans" (*anthropos* – human, *phagein* – to eat), is a more formal and scientific term, primarily found in anthropological and historical studies. Cannibalism, originating from the word "caníbal," is a broader term that can refer to both humans and animals and is more commonly used in everyday language. Therefore, anthropophagy is more precise in reference to human actions, while cannibalism has a wider scope, encompassing other species as well.

Until the time of Columbus, the term "anthropophagy" was commonly used in Europe, but with the emergence of the new term, "cannibalism" quickly spread to other European languages. As Hulme (1992) noted, "Poor 'anthropophagy', if not exactly orphaned, was sent out into the cold until finding belated lodging in the nineteenth century within new disciplines seeking authority from the deployment of classical terminology" (Hulme 1992: 19).

Anthropophagy and cannibalism, although often used interchangeably, have subtle differences in their meaning and usage. The term "cannibalism" comes from the Spanish name (*Caríbales* or *Caníbales*) for an indigenous people of Caribbean, who were repeatedly accused of practising cannibalism by Europeans travelling to the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries. As mentioned, the first to recognize the Caribs as cannibals – people who eat human flesh – was Columbus. He concluded that he had encountered traces of anthropophagus shortly after he first found himself in 1492 in a land hitherto unknown to Europeans. However, reports of anthropophagi are much older, and the figure of a "savage" eating human flesh was one of the monsters often described by mediaeval writers.

Columbus's impressions from his voyages were influenced not only by his personal experiences, but also by earlier writings of scholars and travellers. Expecting to encounter cannibals and other "monsters" in what he believed to be India, Columbus often described not what he saw but what he anticipated finding. His accounts were shaped by existing cultural and literary narratives. Astrid Erll's concept of "premediation" helps explain how previous representations and stories affected the way Columbus and other explorers viewed new worlds. Premediation refers to the process where established cultural patterns and narratives shape how people interpret unexpected events, turning them into meaningful images and stories. In Columbus's case, instead of discovering a completely new reality, his expectations

and interpretations were guided by earlier texts that shaped his view of the world. This supports Erll's idea that our experiences and memories of the past are influenced by pre-existing narrative structures (Erll [2005] 2009: 114). Additionally, Columbus's reports contributed to forming collective identities and historical perceptions, shaping cultural memory patterns. As Erll notes, "not only literary texts, but also travel reports, adventure novels, and poems contributed to the formation of collective identities and historical perceptions" (Erll [2005] 2009: 238).

During his travels, the sailor repeatedly describes not what he saw but what he *wanted* to see. Just as he was wrong about having reached Asia, the encounter with the people he thought were "cannibals" also turned out to be a false trail. A telling example of how the texts Columbus read influenced his perception of reality can be seen by comparing sailor's entries from the diary with the excerpts from the late 15th century popular compendiums of world knowledge. Pierre d'Ailly (c.1351–1420)[1] wrote about people inhabiting lands in the north and south as monsters whose appearance was degraded due to their habit of anthropophagy:

> In these two extremities live forest-dwelling men who eat human flesh. They have deformed and horrible faces. The cause for this is the intemperance of those regions, for which reason they are of evil habits and savage. There, the peoples, or beasts and monsters, are of such horrendous shape, that it is hardly possible to tell whether they are men or beasts. In that place there are evil spirits and devils, as well as malicious beasts. (Gómez 2008: 89)

It is known that Columbus read the above passage. His heavily annotated copy of *The Imago Mundi* contained notes written also on the page containing the description of the anthropophagi. During his first voyage to America, when the native was brought aboard his ship, he characterised him in terms reminiscent of d'Ailly's words:

> The Admiral says that he was quite ugly in appearance, more so than others that he had seen. He had his face all stained with charcoal, although everywhere they are accustomed to staining themselves with different colours. He wore all his hair very long, gathered and tied behind and then put in a small net of parrot feathers. Also, he was naked as the others. The Admiral judged that he must be from the Caribs who eat men [...]. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 329)

Such a remark indicates that Columbus may have been prepared to encounter cannibals, whose habits were supposedly evidenced by the sheer "ugliness." The Genoese explorer assumed that this unattractive appearance suggested moral or cultural inferiority. The concept of monstrous humanoids, usually with animal features, was omnipresent in ancient texts. In the case of Columbus's unfolding narrative of the natives as cannibals, it is important to mention another monster, the cynocephaly. The first author to mention them was Hesiod (between the 8th and 7th centuries BC), who described the creatures as *hemikins* ("half dogs") or *kynokephaloi* ("dog-headed people") who were said to inhabit the Black Sea coast. These descriptions were later echoed by Pliny the Elder (1st century) and Tertullian (2nd–3rd century). In the 5th century St. Augustine wrote in *De Civitate Dei* about their uncertain status: "I don't know what to say about cynocephali, since their dog-like head and barking suggest that [they are] more animal than human" (Morroni 2020: 254–255). However, four centuries later the Benedictine monk Ratramnus of Corbie claimed in his *Epistola de Cynocephalis* that these creatures have a soul and should therefore be considered truly human (Chudzikowska-Wołoszyn 2018).

1 Pierre d'Ailly was a French theologian, cardinal, and advocate of church reform (1378–1417).

Information gleaned from ancient historians was then passed on in mediaeval treatises such as the already mentioned *Imago Mundi*, or the *Historia Rerum ubique Gestarum* by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, which was also popular at the time of Columbus, or the completely fictionalised *Travels of John of Mandeville*. The belief that distant lands are inhabited by fantastic beings had a great influence on the formation of the first encounters between the Europeans and the indigenous of the New World.

Cannibalistic Narrative in Columbus' Diary

The Columbus expedition landed on 12 October 1492 on the island of Guanahaní, named by the Europeans San Salvador. The natives, Taíno people, had scars on their bodies, which intrigued Columbus. He communicated with them using gestures:

> I saw some who had marks of wounds on their bodies, and I made signs to them asking what they were; and they showed me how people from other islands nearby came there and tried to take them, and how they defended themselves; and I believed and believe that they come here from *tierra firme* to take them captive. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 67)

It is important to realise that most of what Columbus presented as the words of the natives was solely his own interpretation – he did not understand the native languages. Convinced that he was near Cathay (China), he claimed that the alleged attackers must have come to the island from the mainland. Columbus persuaded that the seat of the Grand Khan, Chinese emperor, must be located not far from there. Having reached another island, he concluded that it was part of the Asian continent: "[...] he understood that this Cuba was a city and that the land was a very big landmass that went far to the north, and that the king of that land was at war with the Grand Khan, who they call *cami* […]" (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 125). In an entry two days later the name of the ruler was slightly changed: "I believe that all of those islanders are friends and that they wage war with the Grand Khan, whom they call *cavila* […]" (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 129). The natives repeated in Columbus's presence the word he wrote down alternately as *cami* or *cavila*, interpreting it as a similar-sounding term for the emperor of China, Khan.

The narrative of the man-eating monsters appeared after the expedition spent three weeks in the New World. The reference to anthropophagi appears in a passage in which Columbus mentioned at once gold and monsters that characterised Asia as imagined by Europeans:

> He [native] showed them gold and pearls, and certain old men answered that in a place that they called Bohío there was a vast amount and that they wore it on neck and in ears and on arms and legs; and also pearls. Moreover, he understood that they said that there were big ships and much trade and that all of this was to the south-east. He understood also that, far from there, there were one-eyed men, and others, with snouts of dogs, who ate men, and that as soon as one was taken, they cut his throat and drank his blood and cut off his genitals. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 133)

Writing this passage, Columbus may have been heavily inspired by *The Imago Mundi* – Pierre d'Ailly listed cyclopes and cynocephali as the first ones in his list of monstrous species inhabiting Asia (Ailly [1410] 1930: 267). Although unrealistic, descriptions of the indigenous peoples of the New World as dog-headed monsters were reflected in ideas about the natives. One of the earliest engravings depicting indigenous people presents them as human-eaters and cynocephali.

Fig. 1. Unknown artist "Cannibals on a Caribbean Island" [in:] Lorenz Fries (ca. 1490–1531), *Uslegung der Mercarthen oder Carta Marina*. Strasbourg: Johannes Grüninger, 1525, page XVI. Woodcut, hand-colored, 10.5 x 14.4 cm. Early American Painting Archive, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.

The motif of dog-headed humans returned in Columbus's writings three weeks later, when he first gave the name of the alleged anthropophagi as *caniba* or *canima*:

> All the people that he has found up to today, he says, have extreme fear of the men of Caniba, or Canima [...]. He says that after they saw him take the route to this land they could not speak, fearing that they would have them to eat; and he could not take away their fear. And they say that they have but one eye and the face of a dog; and the Admiral thought they were lying and felt that those who captured them must have been under the rule of the Grand Khan. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 177)

Columbus did not believe that monsters could be well-armed, as from the works of scholars, theologians, and travellers he concluded that human-eaters must be primitive creatures. Thus, he was convinced that the natives exaggerated the threat – he believed that the attackers most likely did not eat the natives but kidnapped them into slavery. A few days earlier, he expressed his scepticism about the accounts of a tribe eating human flesh:

> The Admiral says that well he believes there is something in what they say, but that since they [cannibals] were armed they must be people of intelligence and he believed that they must have captured some of them and because they did not return to their own lands they would say that they ate them. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 167)

At first, Columbus consistently denied that the so-called "cannibals" the natives allegedly mentioned to him were man-eaters. In his view, the subjects of the Grand Khan could not have had a taste for human flesh, as this would have demonstrated their primitivism. For this reason, he transformed the word that was originally written as *caniba* into *canima*, as this was more in line with his vision that the natives were kidnapped by the subjects of the Grand Khan (*Gran Can*). The alleged accounts of cyclops and dog-headed people served Columbus to demonstrate the supposed credulousness of the natives. He repeated his assertions:

> And they appear to mean that here behind this Hispaniola, which they call Caritaba, there is a landmass of exceedingly large size. And perhaps they are right, for they may be oppressed by cunning people, because the people of all these islands live in great fear of those from Caniba. And thus, I say again how other times I said, he says, that Caniba is nothing else but the people of the Grand Khan, who must be here very close to this place. And they have ships and come to capture the islanders, and since they do not return the other islanders think that they have been eaten. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 217)

However, after few months Columbus changed this narrative. The reason was that he found no evidence of China's proximity on the islands. He concluded that natives were telling him the "truth" – that on the surrounding islands there was a tribe of monstrous people who kidnapped and ate others. Subsequent entries in the diary and the changes made in the narrative suggest that Columbus deliberately constructed his account to reinforce this perception, thereby shaping the reader's belief in the presence of cannibals. On the occasion of a meeting with a chief of the island of Hispaniola, he had no reservations about the cannibals being one of the tribes:

> The Admiral told him by signs that the sovereigns of Castile would order the Caribs destroyed, and they would order all of them to be brought with hands tied. The Admiral ordered a lombard and spingard to be fired, and when the king saw the effect of their force and what they penetrated, he was astonished. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 237)

The manifestation of force had a specific purpose – the explorer intended to leave some of his crew on Hispaniola, so he was anxious to intimidate the indigenous people there. In doing so, he quite abandoned the narrative that the "cannibals" could be subjects of the Grand Khan. On January 13th, 1493, he already asserted that anthropophagi really existed:

> The Admiral says further that on the islands passed they were greatly fearful of Carib and in some they called it Caniba, but in Hispaniola, Carib; and they must be a daring people since they travel through all these islands and eat the people they can capture. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 331)

Interestingly, Columbus's change in belief regarding the existence of cannibals was not prompted by new evidence of their presence but rather by the absence of signals indicating the proximity of the Grand Khan. Instead, it was Europeans themselves who resembled what Columbus had initially imagined as "cannibals" or rather subjects of the Grand Khan: they came from the "civilised" world, possessed advanced technology, and abducted natives (as interpreters and guides) who did not return. As Stephen Greenblatt noted, Columbus was effectively confronting his own projections (Greenblatt 1991: 90).

The explorer seamlessly moved on to depicting the Caribs as a human-eating tribe. When the first skirmish between the colonizers and the natives occurred later that day, the narrative was used to justify

the Spanish onslaught. As a result of the clash, two natives were killed. Columbus was satisfied with the outcome:

> He was pleased because now the Indians would fear the Christians, since without doubt the people there, he says, are evildoers and he believed they were people from Carib and that they would eat men. [...] And if they are not Caribs, at least they must be from the frontiers and of the same customs and be men without fear […]. (Columbus ([1492–1493] 1989: 335)

In fact, these natives were not Caribbean. The island was inhabited by indigenous people belonging to the Taíno tribe – the same that the Spaniards had encountered since their arrival in the New World. The skirmish occurred not because of the aggressiveness of the islanders, but because Columbus had warned the crew in advance that the island was inhabited by cannibals, so the Spaniards attacked first. In the following years, resistance became a defining characteristic of "cannibals" – a term applied to all natives who fought against the colonisers.

Columbus himself, who was responsible for creating a collective fear of the Caribbean, did not meet any of them during his first expedition. However, his repeated remarks about anthropophagi led to the creation of a "culture of cannibals," with which the Caribbean was identified (Keegan 1996: 17). The day he set off back to Spain, he already considered the existence of the tribe of cannibals certain – on the way he wanted to sail on their island:

> […] in order to go, he says, to the island of Carib, where the people are of whom those of all those islands and lands have so much fear; because, he says, with their numberless canoes they travel through all those seas and, he says, they eat the men that they can catch. (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 341)

Columbus did not reach the island of the Cannibals to see the "monstrous people." This would have been an impossible task – cannibals, about whom he had allegedly heard from other indigenous people, were mythical creatures inhabiting a fictional island.

Cannibals Who Have Come from the Heavens

During his first journey, Columbus heard from natives about three islands: Caribata, Matinino and Guanin. He claimed that they are located near each other and are populated by "monsters": Caritaba by cannibals, Matinino by Amazons, while Guanin was supposed to have a lot of gold. Those lands were in fact fictional lands reflecting specific elements of indigenous mythology. For example, Matinino – in the Taíno language: *Ma-iti-ni-no* – literally "without fathers," which corresponded to the mythological function of the island as a symbol of the female element (Pané [c. 1500] 1974: 63). Guanin, on the other hand, was thought to be the place where sexual union occurs and the conception of children. Completing the mythological triad was the island of Carib, a symbol of male seclusion before union with female partners (Keegan 1996: 27). Columbus regarded the fictional islands as real places inhabited by Amazons or cannibals:

> The Indians told him that on that route he would find the island of Matinino, which, he says, was inhabited by women without men [...]. But he says that it was certain that there were such women, and that at a certain time of year men came to them from the said island of Carib [...], and that if

> they gave birth to a boy, they sent him to the men's island and if to a girl they let her stay with them. (Columbus [1493] 1989: 341)

In fact, there are strong arguments that the indigenous people of the Caribbean islands considered visitors as cannibals. Contrary to the widespread narrative by the Europeans themselves that the natives often regarded them as supernatural, it seems likely that they were perceived more as a kind of demons coming from mythical islands that the natives located to the east. Although Columbus did not write it explicitly, news about European visitors spread through the archipelago quite quickly. The natives warned each other with smoke signals during the day and bonfires burning on the peaks at night. This behaviour was mentioned several times in the diary: "[...] as soon as we arrive anywhere, they make smoke signals from the lookouts throughout all the land, and more so in this island of Hispaniola and in Tortuga [...] than in the others left behind" (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 229).

Critical reading of the diary allows one to pick up traces of the changing attitude of the natives toward the newcomers. Columbus "heard" for the first time about man-eating people after he himself trapped several islanders on a ship. Caribbeans thought that Spaniards ate kidnapped natives – when the explorer wrote about cannibals, he mentioned that at first: "They believed the same thing about the Christians and about the Admiral when some Indians first saw them" (Columbus [1493] 1989: 167). However, this conviction did not leave the islanders, as evidenced by a later entry: "[...] he again sent to land one of the Indians that he had with him, who from afar shouted, saying that they should have no fear because the Spaniards were good people and did harm to no one and were not the Grand Khan's people [...]" (Columbus [1492–1493] 1989: 127). One can guess that the translator was trying to convey to the other islanders not that the Spaniards are not emissaries of the Grand Khan (about whom the islanders had no information), but that they are not "cannibals."

Natives who encountered the Spaniards had reason to believe that they were something akin to wraiths – they could kill at a distance with unknown technology, appeared and disappeared suddenly, kidnapping people with them who never returned. Columbus clearly showed the indigenous people that he was driven only by greed. It is worth quoting a description by the monk Ramón Pané, who tried to describe the beliefs of the indigenous people of Hispaniola during Columbus's second expedition. One of them concerned cannibals:

> They say also that aforementioned *cacique* said, that he spoke with Giocauuaghama [one of local spirits, *zemes*] who told him that those who will live after him will be lords of their own lands for a short time, because to their lands will come people, who walk dressed and will conquer Hispaniola, murdering its inhabitants; Indians will also die of hunger. Initially they believed that it was about people of Cariba, but those only raided Hispaniola and after that went home, so they believed that those described by *zemes* are some other people. Now they already know that it was about the Admiral and his people who came to these lands. (Pané & Arrom 1974: 48)

It is not known to what extent the translation of the Spanish monk corresponded to the words of the natives. The conquest, however, would justify such a prophecy.

Selling Cannibals by the Pound

Although Columbus found no traces supporting cannibalism of the peoples inhabiting the Antilles, he decided to accuse resisting natives of being savage and scurrilous man-eaters. The narrative of "Anthropophagic Antilles" led to accusations of these practices by most of the indigenous people resisting conquest. Since the expedition did not find enough gold, Columbus initiated the practice of transatlantic sales of "live merchandise." In a letter to the Catholic monarchs written during his second voyage, he argued that although maintaining colonies is expensive – requiring payment of wages, transportation of food, and procurement of tools – there is a simple way to cover these costs:

> [For] these things, one could pay with slaves from the Caribbean. They are strong and skilled people, well-built and with lively minds; thus, once they abandon their inhumane customs, I believe they will be better than any other slaves. Moreover, it is to be expected that they will lose this custom once they are outside their own country. We can obtain many of them using the rowing ships we plan to build here. (Columbus ([1492–1493] 1989: 165)

Under laws introduced soon later, only cannibals could be conquered and sold into slavery. In 1520, the royal official Rodrigo de Figueroa established that only five islands out of the entire archipelago were not inhabited by "cannibals" – slaves could therefore be kidnapped from the others (Sale 1990: 64). The report was based on interviews with pilots, captains, and sailors, that is, people involved in human trafficking and interested in expanding "hunting areas" (Stone 2017: 136). Soon hunting humans became the most profitable business in the New World. Accusing the natives of cannibalism benefited the colonisers, who conveniently "discovered" man-eaters wherever they went.

The article presents the circumstances of the origin of the word cannibal. Through the analysis of the writings of the Genoese sailor, it is shown how the expectations and aspirations of Columbus influenced the perception and reception of the inhabitants of the New World. According to the narrative he pursued in the diary, he initially believed that the term "cannibals" referred to the subjects of the Great Khan. His failure to find evidence of having reached the vicinity of China influenced him to change the narrative and eventually to recognize that cannibals were an actual group of indigenous people who fed on human flesh. The created figure of the anthropophagi was used by the conquistadors to justify the alleged civilizational inferiority of the indigenous people and their enslavement and sale. At the same time, the reconstruction of the Caribbean viewpoint on the European newcomers makes it clear that they most likely also viewed the aliens as a kind of mythical monsters.

Spanish chroniclers and travellers perpetuated the myth of indigenous savagery, particularly by suggesting that Native Americans derived pleasure from consuming the bodies of black people, Spaniards, and Portuguese, whose flesh was believed to contain more vitality than that of other Europeans (Obeyesekere 2005: 42). These narratives significantly shaped the European imagination, presenting Native Americans as inherently cannibalistic. However, as research progressed, scholars began to challenge the authenticity of these claims. In the 19th century, an American naturalist Frederick Ober argued that the accusations against the Caribbean were politically motivated, serving the interests of the Spanish Empire rather than reflecting actual indigenous customs (Ober 1894: 15721). Similarly, William Sheldon, a scholar of the Antilles, likened these cannibalistic myths to classical tales such as Homer's depiction of the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* (Sheldon 1820: 424).

As time passed, an increasing number of European intellectuals questioned the validity of these reports. Jean-Baptiste Labat, a French monk and botanist who lived among the Caribbean communities in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, suggested that if cannibalism occurred, it was an expression of indigenous resentment toward Europeans. He contended that anthropophagy, if practised at all, was a retaliatory act rather than a normative dietary custom, and it largely ceased following the end of hostilities with colonizers (Eaden 1970: 103). The French monk Raymond Breton further supported this scepticism, finding no linguistic evidence in the Caribbean languages to suggest that cannibalism was a widespread practice (Myers 1984: 171]. Likewise, a Dominican missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas criticized Columbus's exaggerated reports, rejecting the claim that cannibalism was prevalent among indigenous peoples (Las Casas [1561] 1986: 245).

Contemporary archaeological evidence provides little support for the theory that cannibalism was common among Caribbean or other indigenous groups in the Americas. The 20th century also saw the dismissal of earlier hypotheses that suggested Indians consumed human flesh due to protein shortages (Ortiz de Montellano 1978: 611–617). Historical records indicate that many indigenous tribes followed vegetarian diets, and for numerous Native American groups, the consumption of human flesh was considered taboo (Favarón 2012: 94) Even the Aztecs, who were often characterized by their association with human sacrifice, did not engage in the consumption of fallen comrades during the siege of Tenochtitlan, despite facing starvation.

Ironically, it was Europeans, not indigenous peoples, who were forced to resort to cannibalism in extreme circumstances, such as during the ill-fated 1527 expedition to Florida, where survivors consumed the bodies of their deceased companions. When indigenous groups became aware of these practices, they reportedly reacted with revulsion (Docter 2008: 14).

From an anthropological perspective, cannibalism was neither widespread nor unique to Native American societies. Observed in various regions across the globe, including Europe, Africa, and Asia, it often formed part of religious or funerary rituals. For instance, the Wari people of Brazil practised endocannibalism, consuming the bodies of deceased community members as a mourning ritual. In this cultural context, cannibalism held deep symbolic significance, serving as a means of reconciliation with death and a final farewell to the deceased. The customs of the Wari have been extensively studied, providing valuable insights into the cultural dimensions of cannibalism (Chyc 2007: 66–67).

Modern anthropological approaches, such as Amazonian perspectivism, offer a framework for examining cannibalism from the viewpoint of indigenous peoples, as opposed to the Eurocentric perspectives that dominated earlier scholarship (Viveiros de Castro [1998] 2017: 236–237). By incorporating indigenous voices into the academic discourse, a more nuanced understanding of diverse cultural practices and beliefs can be achieved. Although cannibalism elicited horror among Europeans, it often held entirely different meanings within tribal societies. As one elder from the Wari tribe observed, "Food was not all we did! We cried, we sang, we burned their houses, we burned their things... Write about all this, not just food!" (Conklin 2001: xxii).

Conclusions

The portrayal of indigenous peoples as cannibals during the colonial period was largely unfounded and constructed to legitimize the conquest and subjugation of native populations. A historian Enrique de Gandía posits that this myth originated from Christopher Columbus, who amplified accounts of "bloodthirsty" Indians for his own purposes (Gandía 1929). The term "cannibal" itself derives from the Carib people, who were falsely accused of engaging in anthropophagy (Whitehead 1990: 147). Initially, the term applied specifically to Indigenous groups that resisted Spanish rule, while those who acquiesced were labelled "indios" (Myers 1984: 158). Over time, the notion of "cannibals" was indiscriminately applied to numerous indigenous tribes across the Americas. Moreover, reading Columbus's journals suggests that initially, it was the Indigenous people who regarded Spaniards as cannibals.

European depictions of Native American cannibalism were largely exaggerated and served to rationalise the colonisation and exploitation of indigenous peoples. The allegations of anthropophagy were instrumental in justifying the violent subjugation of those who resisted colonial domination. The practice of cannibalism, where it existed, was predominantly ritualistic or isolated, and the image of "savage cannibals" was a construct of European imagination rather than an accurate reflection of indigenous customs. These misrepresentations not only dehumanised indigenous peoples but also facilitated the broader agendas of colonial powers by creating a narrative that legitimised their aggressive expansion. The persistent myth of "savage cannibals" thus underscores the broader dynamics of colonialism, where cultural misunderstandings and deliberate misinformation served as tools of oppression and control. Recognising and deconstructing these historical inaccuracies is crucial for understanding the full impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures and for fostering a more accurate and respectful historical narrative.

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