



Cannibalism, Colonialism, and the “Civilizing Mission” in Oceania

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Abstract

Both colonialism and cannibalism have been the topic of many papers about Oceania, but few look at them together. In many other colonized countries, such as the discovery and colonization of the Americas, fear-mongering about cannibals aided in the ingroup/outgroup bias that the colonizers, and therefore settlers, held. Taking this into account, this article's purpose was to determine if there is a correlation between the ritualistic cannibalism practiced within the regions of Oceania (Australasia, Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia) and the colonialism that invaded the region, and if there is a correlation, the effects cannibalism had on colonization. Authoritative texts and first-hand accounts were analyzed for records of cannibalism within these geographical regions. Additionally, records of the colonization in Oceania were studied for mention of anthropophagy. Multiple accounts from the same place and time were scrutinized so as to determine the true account. After analysis, only some islands and peoples were more heavily targeted due to the cannibalism practiced, even if the records claiming this were uncredited and false. While in modern times, cannibalism seems to be a focus for specific regions of Oceania for tourism and sensationalism; however, during the colonialism era, it was noticed in only a few locations and groups, and rarely used against the indigenous people.

Keywords: cannibalism, Oceania, colonialism, indigenous, anthropophagy

Introduction

Cannibalism, seen through the modern view, is considered taboo; however, in the past, many different cultures and groups of people participated in the action.

While this paper focuses on the cannibalism practiced within the regions of Oceania, every inhabited continent had records of human cannibalism, or anthropophagy (Greek for 'to eat human'), many of which included endocannibalism, or the practice of eating one from one's own society. Filial, siblicidal, and funerary cannibalism are all considered to be endocannibalism. Records also show exocannibalism, or eating one outside of one's society. Cannibalism derived from warfare and, more modernly, serial killers eating victims are considered exocannibalism (Bello 2025). Nearly every description of cannibalism discussed in this article will be ritual cannibalism. Survival cannibalism, which is the practice of eating another in order to survive the current situation, and autocannibalism, eating oneself, has few to no records and will not be discussed. Gustatory cannibalism, the practice of eating one as a food item outside of starvation has a few records and will be discussed.

Europeans commonly associated the Americas and Oceania with anthropophagy (Sorenson 2024, 0:09). The word cannibal comes from the archaic Spanish word 'caribal', the hispanicized name for the Carib people of the Caribbean—coined by Christopher Columbus (Sorenson 2024, 1:11). This association was used to justify the colonization of these new lands and people, and was used to gain the resources on this land.

The colonization of Oceania began with Portuguese explorers in the early 16th century. The Spanish followed soon after, with the English and Dutch not far behind. Religious missionaries followed after the indigenous people of the islands were discovered. More than two centuries later, Germany and the United States of America also began to make colonies. The

colonization of Oceania resulted in the loss of many traditions, languages, and cultures.

Cannibalism in Australasia

AUSTRALIA

In 1961, in Victoria, Australia, a “Victorian skull-cap drinking bowl” (Massola 1961, 415) was found. While not an explicit reference, the use of human bone as tools is often brought up in the context of cannibalism. The skull-cap mentioned in the article was not the only drinking vessel made from the human cranium found in Australia at the time. A total of six were found, with the other five in museums around the continent; however, this skull-cap was the first to be found in the state of Victoria. The reason given for the existence of the vessel was “the scarcity of suitable material to make water carrying vessels” (Massola 1961, 415).

According to Partington, funerary cannibalism was widespread as a way to honor the dead. Additionally, some Aboriginal groups practiced exocannibalism, in the form of tribal warfare. Partington also mentions that filial and siblicidal cannibalism would occur in parts of Australia, if a child was stillborn or dead soon after birth, the mother or weakly older siblings would have the child reborn within them or to gain strength (2008).

However, colonists seemed to have believed in “an exaggerated idea of the extent of Aboriginal cannibalism” (Partington 2008, 88) due to native groups who were falsely accused by neighboring groups. Europeans recorded inflated sightings or rumors, or being offered human flesh to eat. The embellished cannibalism discussion that travelled around European-settled Australia led to extreme distrust in the indigenous population. One record out of North Queensland tells of miners and police who mutilated bodies to “blame it on the Aboriginal people trying to defend their country” (Partington 2008, 89). Europeans

that sought to draw attention to cannibalism used it to justify the genocide and removal against native Australians. These Europeans called Aboriginal cannibalism “savage”—ignoring the honor behind mortuary cannibalism. Substantial evidence of Aboriginal cannibalism is inconclusive and disconnected. The evidence available was used as a “rationalisation for denying indigenous Australians their rights, occupying their land and destroying their culture” (Partington 2008, 89).

NEW ZEALAND

European explorers wrote many records of the Māori people of New Zealand—many of which include mention of anthropophagy. Europeans first landed on New Zealand in 1769, and very quickly noticed the exocannibalism that occurred on both islands.

Māori cannibalism, despite being the topic of European documentation, does not have substantial archaeological evidence. Most evidence comes from European accounts from afar. Every account about the South Island of New Zealand is exocannibalism. These accounts describe the enemies of the Māori and how the enemies were killed and eaten after battle (Barber 1992; Jennings 2011). Many of these documents of supposed anthropophagy allowed “misunderstandings had led the English crew to falsely assume Māori cannibalism” (Barber 1992, 256). One record mentioned the belief that the cannibalism practiced in New Zealand was gustatory cannibalism, and arose from the “eagerness for, and the satisfaction which they testified in eating” (Barber 1992, 257) human flesh, as the eyewitness noticed the abundance of food sources on the islands. Despite the number of accounts, no European “actually witnessed the consumption of human flesh in anything like an authentic context” (Barber 1992, 264).

In addition to European explorers, Marists from France went south to Oceania. The stereotypes of savage natives already existed by the time the Marists arrived in New Zealand; a multitude of previous records from both the North and South Islands had circulated around Europe in the 19th century for nearly three centuries. The Marists mission in New Zealand was to convert Māori to Catholicism. Unlike the European colonizers, who believed in a Self and Other (ingroup/outgroup bias), the Europeans being the Self and the Māori being Other, the Marists saw themselves as Self and Māori, other Europeans, and Protestant missionaries as Other. “They had little good to say about the sailors and settlers, whose behaviour they believed debased Maori, but they reserved their most subjective writing for their religious rivals” (Jennings 2011, 135). Many of the accounts from Marists mention cannibalism—three accounts mention the same raid and the exocannibalism from it—but many also talk of the Māori people being friendly and not like the savages the Marists read about (Jennings 2011). “He looks kind and affable, and he is in fact” (Jennings 2011, 138). This record is a direct contrast to a more typical European account, where an English explorer “believed he saw proof of cannibalism” in the eyes of a Māori chief (Jennings 2011, 138). Many of the Marist accounts came directly from Māori. Some Marist accounts tell of mortuary cannibalism of the Māori chiefs when killed in battle, however; only a few accounts of endocannibalism still exist. A Marist father made “an intriguing link between ritual cannibalism and Communion” (Jennings 2011, 142). The presence of cannibalism within the Marists records is fact. These records however, records that come directly from Māori, claim only exocannibalism through tribal warfare, and no

endocannibalism such as mortuary or funerary cannibalism.

Cannibalism in Melanesia

FIJI

Tribes of Fijians practiced exocannibalism with other tribes, using ‘cannibal forks’ to ritualize the process. However, because the Fijian archipelago has a lack of large animals, anthropophagy became a tradition and had morphed into gustatory cannibalism (Bello 2025, 13, 15-17; Ezzo 2008, 17). Archaeological evidence of cannibalism in Fiji dates back to 780 BCE, spread over nine islands (Bello 2025, 16). Fiji was colonized and used as a plantation colony by the British, losing much of its culture over time.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Archaeological evidence of cannibalism in Papua New Guinea dates back to as early 1606 CE on Rossel, Southern Massim Island. Two sites were excavated, with both sites showing bones with evidence of cut marks, marrow extraction, and burning (Bello 2025, 9, 11). The more common example of cannibalism from Papua New Guinea took place on the main island of New Guinea. The Fore people practiced funerary cannibalism, where the women and children would eat the deceased person in a ritual. The Fore people became infamous for a degenerative neurological disease, called Kuru, that started to affect the population in the 1950s. At some point in the Fore peoples’ history, someone had developed sporadic Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a prion disease, located in the central nervous system. Because the brain of the deceased is eaten, the prions transferred to the women and children. The Fore people stopped practicing ritualistic cannibalism in 1960 due to a law placed by the British-run Australian government, but the last known death of Kuru was in 2009 due to the long incubation period of the disease (Bello 2025, 9).

Cannibalism in Micronesia

MARIANA ISLANDS

The use of human bone tools can be associated with cannibalism. A cemetery from the island of Guam from a late prehistoric and early European contact was excavated. In addition to spear points made from human bone, there were missing bones from “selected portions of the human skeletal remains” (McNeill 2002, 175). The bones missing were from the limbs, with 11 spear points found made from the tibia, the longer bone in the lower leg. Early Spanish accounts report the use of human bone spear points, as well as wood tips and fishbone points. Human bone points, knives, and awls have also been found on other islands in the modern Mariana Islands, including digging sites on Rota and Saipan, two prominent islands within the Mariana archipelago (McNeil, 2002).

FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA

One possible example of cannibalism in the Federated States of Micronesia is on the small island of Kosrae, which has an extensive pre-European mortuary pattern for the equivalent upper-class of the island. Only one burial site is under consideration for evidence of cannibalism. This site has “considerable breakage of the long bones, possibly prior to burial” (Cordy 2022, 21), which could be a sign of breakage for access to the marrow. However, because this is the only known site of possible cannibalism in the Federated States of Micronesia, it is not likely that it is proof of anthropophagy.

Cannibalism in Polynesia

COOK ISLANDS

The explorer that the Cook Islands are named after, James Cook, is known for exaggerated tales of cannibalism, in order to provide justification for the colonization of native lands and the mistreatment of the people; however, there is also archaeological evidence for the possibility of

cannibalism on the Cook Islands. Human bones have been found in earth ovens, supporting the existence of cannibalism and ritual sacrifice. However, no cut marks, broken bones, or dismemberment have been reported (Bello 2025, 12). After colonization, the Cook islands were used for cash crop growth, and the native people for labor.

EASTER ISLAND

Warfare was very common on Easter Island (Rapa Nui). There is evidence that exocannibalism and endocannibalism occurred during the ecological collapse of the island as the population increased. As the ecology of Rapa Nui collapsed, starvation and warfare became more prevalent, and the population crashed. Archaeological evidence of cannibalism is lacking, even with skeletal fractures, like cranial fractures and broken bones, which are similar to other cannibalistic killings. If cannibalism existed on Rapa Nui, it was practiced in very different ways from the other examples of cannibalism in Oceania. “Thus, we are left with only hearsay, likely embellished European accounts, and mentions in oral traditions collected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries argued in support of cannibalism” (DiNapoli et al. 2020, 8). Rapa Nui was not colonized by Europeans, however the native people and environment was still heavily affected by European diseases, slave raids, and sheep ranching that further damaged the fragile ecosystem of the island (DiNapoli et al. 2020, 3-4).

MARQUESAS ISLANDS

The Marquesas Islands are a part of modern French Polynesia. A record from 1888 by Robert Louis Stevenson refers to the Marquesans as “not cruel”, and that apart from the practice of cannibalism, were

“a race of the most kindly” (Stevenson 1896, 109).

Aside from the cannibal forks of Fiji, one of the most known features of cannibalism anywhere is long-pig. Long-pig was used by white people to refer to human meat, and is supposedly a translation from a people who practiced cannibalism. The Marquesans allegedly used the term to distinguish between pork and human meat. Stevenson claimed that the native people of the Marquesas islands used ‘long-pig’ as currency and as food in rituals, even comparing it to the Christian sacrament (1896, 111), however no ethnoarchaeological records are known of that give any evidence of cannibalism (Donaldson 2018).

Conclusion

The practice of ritualistic cannibalism, and the subsequent fear of it, did not affect the colonization of Oceania; however, it monumentally affected how the indigenous peoples were treated. The people of the islands that practiced cannibalism felt different responses from colonizers regarding their ritualistic and cultural activities. Many of the indigenous people of Oceania were seen as savage and

uncivilized, as the fear of a person eating another was used to make everyone other than Europeans seem savage—whether they practiced cannibalism or not. This racism against the ‘Other’ facilitated the erasure of many of the people, cultures, and traditions of the native communities of the Pacific Islands. These cultures have been lost to time through assimilation and forced conversion. Over time, Pacific Islanders have begun to regain their history, including the sections considered to be taboo to the Western world.

The indigenous peoples Australia and New Zealand were more heavily affected from the Western views on cannibalism, even if the reports and accounts were false. The Aboriginals and the Māoris had more instances of bias-motivated violence and were blamed for crimes, because of the preconceived ideas of their savagery. The smaller archipelagos, like Fiji and the Mariana Islands, did not offer as much land and resources, and therefore the peoples of these islands were not as greatly exploited. Countries and islands in Oceania that had cannibalism were colonized, showing that cannibalism had no outright effect on colonization.

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