Eating the dead in Madagascar

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Cannibalism has been poorly understood and has seldom been studied, since it was often suppressed by missionaries and colonial administrators, and very few societies still practise it. Cannibalistic practices are more complex than was originally thought. They may be supported in societies under stress or in times of famine, to reflect aggression and antisocial behaviour (in cases where the bodies of enemies killed in battle or people who have harmed the family are eaten), or to honour a dead kinsman. It was, for example, noted in Madagascar during the imperial campaigns of Ranavalona I in the period 1829 - 1853 that enemies were consumed, and endocannibalism, where dead relatives were eaten to assist their passing to the world of the ancestors, or to prolong contact with beloved and admired family members and absorb their good qualities. This article reviews some of the beliefs and motivations that surrounded the cannibalistic practices of the people of Madagascar in the 19th century.

Cannibalistic tradition in Imerina (Madagascar)

The old man stated:

'According to that which was reported, in former times, when a person died, all the members of the family were summoned; and when all were present, the head of the family spoke, saying: “Our beloved [relative] has just died! What are we going to do with him? For he was, for us all, a charming and highly agreeable relative.” Then, certain people spoke up, stating: “If our dearly beloved is dead, we will not bury him, but will eat him, for it will be distressing to think of our dearly beloved rotting underground.” So ... they ate the remains of the deceased. However, the kings ate only the remains of other kings ... Only the hova [ordinary caste] consumed [non-royal] human remains ... [Until] one day, the son of a very wealthy man died. The entire family were summoned. When all were present, the relatives thus assembled spoke saying: “All of us are present; start the usual custom, for night is falling.” The father of the deceased spoke in his turn, saying:

“Do so! If the family wish so to do, then I also wish it. However, if they don’t agree, then neither do I. What would you think, ladies and gentlemen, if with your consent, I substituted bullocks for the body of my son, for I am feeling truly grief-stricken and would like to keep it. However, I wish that everyone agree to my proposition, and should the majority not accept, then I will also reject it.” The people considered the proposition, for it would be innovatory to replace the corpse. The family were still pondering the affair when dawn broke. Then, they declared: “The proposition is, perhaps, acceptable ... the suffering that one feels for a [lost] child is one known to all; everyone feels grief for a dear one ... So, a large number of cattle will be substituted for the remains of the dead son because his father was rich; and the bullocks will be eaten instead of the corpse. And this meat will be called henaratsy [bad meat] because, before this, the mortal remains [of the dead] were eaten and this was bad.'

This apparent reference to cannibalism among the Merina of Madagascar, derived by the Catholic priest Callet, possibly from writer-interpreter Lucien Andriamisesa (1913 - 1997), when transcribing the collection of indigenous oral traditions known as Tantaran’ ny Andriana (‘History of the Kings’), attracted little attention until 1956, when Louis Molet, a French Protestant missionary and anthropologist, published a work in which he claimed that the Merina, in common with the other ethnicities of Madagascar, practised funeral rites that demonstrated clear signs of having once been focused around the eating of the dead. His book provoked considerable public controversy in Imerina, and received negative reviews from intellectuals such as Louis Michel and Maurice Bloch, who alluded to, but summarily rejected, the alleged tradition of funeral cannibalism among the Merina. All have insisted that Callet’s note – on which he did not elaborate – should not be taken at face value, and was either mistaken or a metaphor indicating the symbiotic relationship of the living and the ancestors.
**The nature of cannibalism**

Cannibalism has been poorly understood because the practice was suppressed by missionaries and colonial officials, and there remain very few societies that still practise it. Researchers have therefore tended to consider the practice in symbolic terms, notably to reflect aggression and antisocial behaviour. In cannibalistic societies people would generally eat the bodies of enemies killed in battle or of individuals who had harmed members of their families (e.g. Young and Stewart and Strathern), a ritual also allegedly practised by some communities in southern and western Madagascar.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that cannibalistic practices are far more complex than was originally thought. For example, cannibalism was practised almost universally in societies under severe and sustained stress, notably in times of famine, as in 1259, when cannibalism was rife in Kyoto, Japan; in Mchenge, Central China, in the early 1350s; in Persia in mid-1871; during the great famine of 1030 - 1033 in France; and on the French retreat from Moscow in 1812. It was also noted in Madagascar during the imperial campaigns of Ranavalona I of Imerina in the period 1829 - 1853, both among the Taisaka on the southeast littoral of the island, and the Ikongo of the southeast plateau who ate Merina captives immediately to the south of Imerina:

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On the fourth day another ox is killed, and the skin from that and those killed previously are cut up into long strips. The corpse is then held upright against the beam of the house, an incision is made in the heel of each foot, and all the putrid liquid matter is scarcely but skin and bone, the corpse is strapped to the beam and there left. Great care is taken of these pots, and the corpse cannot be removed from the house until a small worm appears in one of them; this sometimes takes two or three months in appearing. The worm is allowed to grow a little; then the body may be buried, and the killing of oxen is increased. The body is then buried with much state, and the earthen pot in which this worm is placed is into the grave too, and a long bamboo is put in the pot, an opening being left at the top of the tomb through which this bamboo protrudes. After six or eight months, this worm climbs up the bamboo, and makes its appearance in the town. It is called fanano; and is of lizard shape. Then come the relations of the dead, who approach this lizard, saying: 'Art thou so and so?' If it lifts its head, that is an infallible sign that it is he or she. The plate the deceased last ate off is fetched, an ox’s ear is cut, and the blood on the knife is carried along with some rum on the plate and placed before this fanano, and should it eat the blood and drink the rum then no more doubt can be entertained as to the identity of the thing. ‘Let us then go into the house’ the people say, and a clean cloth is laid on the ground, the fanano steps upon the cloth, and is carried amid great rejoicing, killing of oxen, and feasting, into the town. After this the fanano is carried back to the tomb, where it remains, grows to an enormous size, and for ever remains the guardian of the town.[20]

Possibly related to this tradition is the common belief that certain types of intestinal worms (Enterobius vermicularis) are beneficial, called ‘guardians of life’ and considered to remain in the body until death approaches.[21] Other traditions report the fanano being carried to, and emerging from, a lake; and of it having seven heads.[22] By the end of the 19th century, the Betsileo fanano belief and ritual spread to the neighbouring Tanala of the great eastern forest.[23] Ralph Linton,[24] probably following the tradition of Vaisièrre,[25] referred to the animal reincarnation of the deceased as ‘a large snake apparently of the boa family’. The Tambohaoa and other peoples influenced by Islamic beliefs on the south-east coast believed that liquids produced by decay of a chief’s corpse resulted in the appearance of a large sea-serpent.[26]

In mythology, lizards, snakes and are commonly linked to crocodiles. Among the Eko of West Africa, the cult of the snake is closely associated with that of crocodiles, which are believed to be sacred guardians of the Lake of the ancestral spirits.[27] The Malagasy generally have a superstitious dread of the crocodile. The Zafindravoay clan of the Antandroy in southern Madagascar believe themselves to be descendants of a sexual union between a crocodile and an Antandroy woman, while Placour[28] recounts the story that the Malagasy princess Zafiraminana gave birth to a crocodile. This, according to Claude Allibert,[29] is a clear indication of the belief, derived from Austronesia, that the ancestors live on in animal, notably crocodile, form. There are a number of fady (taboos) associated with the crocodile. Many considered it fady to kill a crocodile. James Sibree[30] reported that the Antankarana, in the extreme north of Madagascar, believed that the spirits of their chiefs passed into crocodiles, and those of inferior people into other animals, while one Zafindravoay clan living among the northern Tsimihety accorded to crocodiles the same funerary rites as they did to humans. The Zafindravoay refuse to kill crocodiles, to which they formerly gave the lungs of all slaughtered cattle, and which they believe would not harm them[31] (see also Chapeller[32]).

In sum, when David Griffiths, longest-serving member of the first London Missionary Society mission to Madagascar, stated that the Merina had a common saying that ‘as the white men possess neither cattle nor sheep in their homeland, they come here to purchase captives in order to fatten and slaughter them instead of animals,[33] he may not necessarily, as is conventionally believed, have been implying that the Merina did not practise cannibalism because they possessed cattle and sheep to provide meat. In fact, cattle and sheep were traditionally rare and highly valued in Imerina, where they were generally only consumed on important ritual occasions such as funerals where the heatrahy played a pivotal role.