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Abstract

Paul Raffaele has written a particularly absorbing book about his ethnographic studies to discover the last remaining participants in the enigmatic and disconcerting practice of cannibalism. His research takes him across the globe living with societies from New Guinea to Mexico.

Keywords

Ethnography, Cannibalism, Ritualistic Murder

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Among the Cannibals: A Review

Julie Schuh

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Paul Raffaele has written a particularly absorbing book about his ethnographic studies to discover the last remaining participants in the enigmatic and disconcerting practice of cannibalism. His research takes him across the globe living with societies from New Guinea to Mexico. Keywords: Ethnography, Cannibalism, Ritualistic Murder

I found the book *Among the Cannibals: Adventures on the Trail of Man's Darkest Ritual* by Paul Raffaele (2010) in the library of a cruise ship while I was looking for something to read as I soaked up the sun on deck. I had been looking for a good novel, but the title was so compelling and honestly so repelling, that I could not resist opening up the cover to see what the book contained. As Raffaele states in his Preface, "Few of us ever want to be cannibals, but most of us want to hear stories about them" (Raffaele, 2010, p. 1).

From the moment I began to read, I was absorbed in Raffaele's prose. Raffaele explains that although his research was in response to a book written in 1979 by American anthropologist William Arens, *The Man-eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, in which he concluded that trial and ritual cannibalism never existed. "I have been unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society. Rumors, suspicions, fears and accusations abound, but no satisfactory first-hand accounts" (as cited in Raffaele, 2010, p. 4). Raffaele's answer to Arens was to travel to five areas of the globe where rumor of ritualistic cannibalism currently being practiced still abounds.

Ethnographic research puts an emphasis on the study of an entire culture through participant observation. Immersion into the culture as an active participant and extensive note taking and reporting of the experience is essential as a part of the research. The author, Paul Raffaele is a trained journalist who developed an interest in cultural anthropology researching and writing for Smithsonian magazine. He makes no mention of his methodology, and the reader is left wondering how he chose the cultures he studied and reported upon in the book. The sections of the book, divided by locality are presented almost as a travelogue; however, Raffaele's vivid descriptions are interspersed with significant amounts of historical and religious data. This background lays the foundation for the reader to become almost as immersed in the ethnographic study as Raffaele.

The first two sections of the book, the Korowai tribe of New Guinea and the Aghor holy men of India present Raffaele's encounters with cannibals of the 21st century. The Korowai believe in the supernatural means of possession of evil spirits to explain mysterious sickness and death. The killing and ritualistic eating of the possessed *khakhua* (Raffaele, 2010, p. 67) was to combat that evil. Raffaele's journey to the tree houses in which the Korowai live is wonderfully detailed. Almost written as if fictional, his descriptions of the jungle, the animals, weather, and people transport the reader into this other world of a society living as they have lived for thousands of years. When Raffaele is invited into the tree house of the chief, Boas, I sat at the edge of my seat wondering if the chief would ask Raffaele to partake of human flesh (he did not).

The Aghor, on the other hand, practice the ritualistic eating of flesh to demonstrate their supreme holiness. They believe that their ascetic religious practices have raised them to such a holy level that they can overcome the horrors of eating flesh because of it. Aghor live at the charnel grounds along the Ganges River. Following a cremation, these ascetics partake

of what flesh is not consumed by the fire. Although Indians know and understand that the ascetics are there, they do not condone their actions, and the Aghor's ritualistic practice takes place in the dead of night.

The difference between these two tribes is that the Korowai are raised to believe that they are not committing an evil act but believe they are doing good, convinced that their act destroys forever a malevolent presence that has come among them. The Aghor, on the other hand, choose to eat flesh of their own free will, choosing to break the taboo to prove that they are holy.

In the final three sections of the book, Raffaele travels to Tonga in the South Pacific, which he inelegantly describes as the land of the world's fattest people; to Uganda, where the rebel leader Joseph Kony and his troops have forced thousands of children into their army, forcing them to butcher and eat their victims; and finally to Mexico, where he walks the land of the Aztecs. It is in these final three sections of the book that Raffaele lost my interest, and his perspective.

While reading about how modern Tongans remember how their ancestors once practiced ritual cannibalism is enlightening, Raffaele's tangential writing about Captain Cook and his voyages to the South Pacific is disturbingly off track. As well, Raffaele spends more time writing about the transvestite subculture of Tonga than cannibalism. It is almost as if not finding any contemporary cannibals, he needed to write about something.

The book section about the Ugandan LRA and Joseph Kony is simply disgusting. While the atrocities committed in Uganda do contain instances of cannibalism, this forced cannibalism has no place within a book about ritualistic cannibalism. This whole book section would have served a better purpose in a book of its own, rather than buried in this one.

Finally, in the last book section on the Aztecs, Raffaele discusses an ongoing scholarly question whether or not the Aztecs practiced cannibalism along with the ritualistic murder that has been proven to have taken place. Again, this discussion really has no place in this book. There are no Aztec people alive who can confirm or deny what took place on the Mesoamerican pyramids of central Mexico. And cannibalism is certainly not practiced among any Aztec people today.

Overall, I thought the book gave great insight into the very different and almost insulated cultures of the Korowai and Aghors. In these two societies, Raffaele seemed to have a great ability to get his subjects to open up to him about their most secret beliefs and practices. However, the final three societies had absolutely no place in this book whatsoever. Not only were two of the societies not currently practicing any form of ritualistic cannibalism, but to attempt to portray forced cannibalism as a cultural phenomenon is ridiculous. The book is an engrossing read, but aside from the first two societies, cannot even realistically qualify as ethnographic research.

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Author Note

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