

Topic Page: [Cannibalism](#)

Definition: **cannibalism** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

The practice of eating human flesh. The name is derived from the Caribs, a South American and West Indian people, alleged by the conquering Spaniards to eat their captives. The custom was at one time widespread in the Americas, New Guinea, Indonesia, and parts of West Africa. It was usually ritual in purpose, done in order to control the spirits of the dead, acquire their qualities, or as a mark of respect.

Summary Article: **Cannibalism**

From *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*

Cannibalism, also called anthropophagy, is the human act of eating parts of the human body, including, but not limited to, flesh, muscles, and blood. The origins of the word are a result of a conversational misunderstanding between Christopher Columbus and a guide referring to a group of barbaric people in the West Indies who ate human flesh. While the natives referred to them as Caribs, Columbus called them Canibales by mistake. This idea of savage cannibalism became more popular with the voyages of Captain James Cook in the Pacific Ocean and his ship's many dialogues and encounters with the Maoris, Polynesians, and Tahitians. Reports of cannibalism exist throughout the world, with the first records dating back 500,000 years. These reports have usually focused on groups of people whom the people of the Western world have considered to be barbarians, savages, or others.

Falsified literary reports issued by various governments to spread the rumor of cannibalism in countries such as Russia, Poland, and Ireland in times of crises and war as a means of propaganda have been documented. This is not to say, however, that cannibalism is a complete falsification. Social scientists view societies that practice cannibalism and incidents involving cannibalism in one of three separate ways: psychogenic cannibalism, a means of satisfying mythic and overarching psychosexual fantasies and desires; utilitarian/adaptive cannibalism, an adaptation of hunger or other material deficiency; or hypothetico-deductive cannibalism, part of the overall universal order and a normative function in society.

Within these analytical frameworks of understanding cannibalism, there are also five different categories for various acts of cannibalism. Exocannibalism is the cannibalism of war and the eating of the "other" who is not a member of one's tribe, whereas endocannibalism is the cannibalism of those who are either in, or related to, one's tribe. Survival or emergency cannibalism is the consumption of a human for purposes of nourishment and protein deficiency, and chaotic cannibalism is associated with a power or force that is believed must be eaten to be destroyed. The last type, lunatic-fringe cannibalism, is often dramatically reported; its most important benefit is the reinforcement of the stereotype of cannibalism.

The cannibal ritual of the literal eating of the flesh and blood of a fellow human has been hard to definitely establish because the majority of early accounts with supposed cannibals were based off an ethnocentric colonial point of view. The sparsely populated country of Papua New Guinea has long been spoken of as having an interior populated by cannibals. Tribal groups such as the Fore, the Huli, the Kutubu, the Strickland-Bosavi, the Duna, and the Mianman have allegedly practiced cannibalism. However, the sources for these acts of cannibalism tend to be unreliable as they usually arise as one

tribe's commentary on their neighboring, and often enemy, tribe.

There are, however, two strands of evidence that legitimize cannibalism more so than unreliable neighboring accounts. The outbreak of Kuru, which is a disease of the nervous system studied by Nobel Prize recipient Daniel Gajdusek in the Fore people, tied the degeneration of the cells of the brain to being passed from person to person by cannibalism. Another source that accounts for an accurate depiction of cannibalism is a detailed description of the Miamman raid on the Owinga people of Papua New Guinea, where cases of cannibalism occurred. The police account of the report, which was backed up by witnesses and defendants, cited that the bodies of the victims were cut up and later eaten with a side of taro.

Cannibalism also exists in cultures in the form of mythology. In European and American cultures, creatures such as werewolves, witches, and vampires often consumed human flesh or blood for power and various nefarious purposes. In the BiminKuskusmin culture of Papua New Guinea, there are many tales of witches, sorcerers, and female tricksters (known as *kamdaak waneng*), all whom eat various parts of humans in order to gain power.

Groups of people who have been accused of practicing cannibalism have a number of similar traits. First, they come from societies that are politically homogeneous, and where the local government is the supreme form of power. Second, these people associate themselves with societies that have a history and culture of maternal dependency, a subdued taboo against sexual intercourse, and suppressed male aggression against both males and females. Finally, they come from societies where there is a significant level of food stress, especially when it includes protein. It is important to note that just because one of these groups possesses these characteristics, does not mean that they will engage in cannibalism (there is no documented link between hunger and desire to resort to cannibalistic practices, for instance).

Emergency cannibalism is highlighted in depth in this entry, as it is the most prevalent type in both historical and contemporary literature, and it continues to be the main form of cannibalism reported in the industrial Western world. Because acts of emergency cannibalism often occur in sparsely populated places, and the practices often belong to a dying, war-like group who is more intent on survival than cultural preservation, there is very little evidence of specific tribes actually practicing this type of cannibalism.

Societies or time periods during which such emergency cannibalism is thought to have existed include the Anasazi Indians of Chaco Canyon in the American Southwest; in Ireland during the Irish potato famine; in China during the Three Kingdom period, the Tang period, and the Han period; during the siege of Leningrad in the early 1940s; and in the Jewish ghettos during World War II. These reports are based on personal accounts and archaeological findings.

There are a number of more prominent incidents in the past 2 centuries that indicate the existence of emergency cannibalism. The first is the infamous case of the Donner Party. In 1846, the Donner Party, organized by George Donner, set off across the Rocky Mountains toward the Sacramento Valley. After disregarding the advice of the group's guide, they were trapped in a series of snowstorms for well over a month. After all the food, including their oxen, horses, and dogs, was diminished, the group contemplated eating the members of their party who had already died. After 5 days of hesitation, they began eating the remains of Patrick Dolan. At the end of their ordeal, approximately 45 people survived, many of whom resorted to emergency cannibalism.

Another well-documented example of emergency cannibalism occurred when an F-227 airplane crashed in the Andes Mountains of Argentina in 1972, carrying members of the Uruguayan rugby team called “The Old Christians.” In brief, after using up all of their rations after the crash, the survivors began to consume the bodies of those who had already died; they ate everything from their buttocks, to their hands, to their brains. Just like the Donner Party, there was fear of the social taboo of cannibalism and especially the commentary that their devout Catholic upbringings had for respect of the body. In the end, all of the survivors eventually resorted to cannibalism. After a more than 2-month ordeal, the remaining 16 survivors were rescued and quickly became national heroes. As the Roman Catholic Church justified it, if they had refused to eat the bodies, they then would have been committing suicide, which is a greater offense than cannibalism.

One of the most recent reports of cannibalism occurred on a Vietnamese refugee boat in 1988. After leaving the port of Truc Dang, the motor on the ship faltered and the junk became stranded, as it did not have a sail or a replaceable motor. After running out of food and being ignored by both Japanese and American vessels, Phung Quang Minh, the self-appointed captain of the ship, suggested that the group begin using the bodies of the dead for the living. Unlike becoming the heroes of the Donner Party or Uruguayan air flight 571, Phung and nine others were incarcerated after the junk arrived on the island of Luzon in the Philippines; about half of the original crew survived.

Although still uncommon, contemporary events of cannibalism are found in popular culture, emphasizing the modern world's portrayal of cannibalism as a social taboo and an act of “the other” and “the savage.” A contemporary story of cannibalism involves Armin Miewes, who posted an advertisement for a person who was willing to be eaten; Bernd-Jürgen Brandes answered the article and was later killed and eaten. Miewes, who stored parts of Brandes's body for over 6 months, was placed on trial and was later convicted.

Another modern cannibalistic event occurred when Chilean shock artist Marco Evaristti fed dinner guests meatballs that were made out of his own body fat removed by liposuction. Although deemed cannibalistic by the public, the police and government took no action. Other examples are presented in movies such as Fruit Chan's *Dumplings*, Bartel's *Eating Raoul*, and Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*.

See also

Body Disposition, Christian Beliefs and Traditions, Death, Anthropological Perspectives, Legalities of Death, Popular Culture and Images of Death

Further Readings

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