

CANNIBALISM IN NORTH AMERICA

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The Iroquois, for example, are well known for their incessant warfare and their training of males to be immune to pain. They are also well known for their merciless treatment of prisoners of war. Captives were forced to run a gauntlet, their fingernails were pulled out and their limbs hacked off, and they were finally decapitated or roasted alive at the stake – after which their remains were consumed in cannibalistic feasts.

Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origin of Cultures*, Glasgow, 1978, p. 69

The Kwakiutl Indians have asserted, when interrogated, that the practice of cannibalism only became general about a hundred years ago. White men who travelled in their territory were able to witness many of their ceremonial dances, and two of them, Hunt and Moffat, brought back first-hand information about their customs. They say that sometimes slaves were killed for the benefit of Hamatsas [the cannibal members of the Kwakiutl], and that at other times the Hamatsas contented themselves with snatching mouthfuls of flesh from their own tribesmen – usually from the chest and upper arms of well-fleshed individuals.

They vouch for an example of ritual cannibalism which took place near Fort Rupert. A Kwakiutl shot and wounded a slave, who ran away and collapsed on the beach at the water's edge. He was pursued by the tribesmen, including a group of the 'Bear Dancers' and Hamatsas. The slave's body was cut to pieces with knives while the Hamatsas squatted in a circle round them crying out their terrible cry: 'Hap! Hap! Hap! Hap!'

Helpless to intervene, Moffat and Hunt watched the Bear Dancers snatch up the flesh, warm and quivering, and growling like the Grizzly they represented, offer it to the Hamatsas in order of seniority.

The wife of the dead slave was at the time in Fort Rupert, and, like Hunt and Moffat, witnessed the slaughter of her husband, helpless to avert it. But she had a weapon that the white men did not possess: she could throw a curse over the Hamatsas.

'I will give you five years to live,' she shrieked at them from the walls of Fort Rupert. 'The Spirit of your Dancing is strong, but my spirit is stronger still. You have killed my husband with knives; I shall kill you with the point of my tongue.'

Within five years of this episode, the white men report, every member of the tribe who had taken part in the killing of this slave was dead. In memory of the grim episode, a rock on the beach where the ritual feast took place was carved into the likeness of the Baxbakualanuxsiwae mask.

The tradition died hard. A Hamatsa demanded that another slave – this time a female – should dance for him. She stood a moment looking at him in terror, and said: ‘I will dance. But do not get hungry. Do not eat me!’ She had hardly finished speaking when her master, a fellow member of the tribe, split her skull open with an axe, and the Hamatsa thereupon began to eat her flesh. This actual Hamatsa was still alive towards the end of the nineteenth century, and on interrogation remarked, among other things, that it is very much harder to consume fresh human flesh than the dried flesh of corpses that have been left to mummify in the trees and then brought down to appease the Hamatsa’s hunger. He also said that it was common practice to swallow hot water after a mouthful of flesh taken from a living body, as it was believed that this would cause the inflammation of the wound made by the teeth. All cannibal tribes, of course, file their teeth to sharp points in order to deal more effectively with their food.

There was a variant of the practice whereby the returning Hamatsa ran riot among the members of his tribe, biting flesh from them. Sometimes he brought a corpse with him – that of a slave or some victim captured and killed for the purpose. He ate part of this corpse after his ceremonial dance was completed, but because this was the first corpse to be devoured by him since his initiation, it was prepared with extra elaborate care. One of the most important details was the removal of the skin at the wrists and ankles, for the Kwakiutls believed that to eat of either hand or foot would result in almost immediate death. This is one of the many examples of the divergences of custom in this respect; to the Kwakiutls, hands and feet were tabu; but among the Mangeromas of the Amazon jungles, whose customs we shall be examining in due course, the palms of the hands, and the soles of the feet, were looked upon as the greatest delicacies, and were reserved for those of the tribe who for one reason or another demanded priority.

Most recently, that is to say at the very end of the nineteenth century, it seems that the barbarous practices among the Kwakiutls had become modified to a very great extent: the ceremonial was retained, but symbolism played a larger and larger part in the ceremonial, replacing the physical act. For example, the late-nineteenth-century Hamatsa did not necessarily bite a mouthful of flesh from the chest or the arm. Instead, he caught a piece of skin between his teeth and sucked at it hard, to extract the taste of blood. Then, with a sharp knife, he would snip off a piece of skin and pretend to swallow it. However, instead of swallowing it in fact, he put it into his hair behind his ear, to lie there until the ceremonial dancing was over. Then it was returned to the owner, who was thus assured that a piece of his own skin would not eventually be used to his harm in some piece of witchcraft.

It was, as it were, the beginning of the end. From the horrors of that house on the mountainside in which Baxbakualanuxsiwae and his hideous attendants practised their fiendish rites, the customs of the Kwakiutls have been refined to a ritual dance with gestures hardly more dangerous than mime.

Garry Hogg, *Cannibalism and Human Sacrifice*, pp. 70-72

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