Love Me, Miss Me, Eat Me

An anthropologist studies 'compassionate cannibalism' in an Amazonian tribe

By D.W. MILLER

In the jungle just outside Santo Andre, a remote village in western Brazil, the local Wari' Indians go to a small cemetery to bury their dead. Only earthen mounds mark the graves. For Wari' younger than 45 or so, burial is the only way to dispose of corpses that they have ever known. But many older Wari' still think of interment as cruel and disrespectful, to surviving relatives as well as to the deceased. They remember the old way, and wonder what they have lost.

Until the 1960's, they say, when outsiders came and forced them to stop, the Wari' roasted and ate the flesh and organs of their dead. Sometimes bones and other inedible parts were burned or pulverized, then consumed.

The Wari' know that outsiders consider cannibalism barbaric. The younger generation has no desire to revive the practice. Yet older Wari' who once ate human flesh or, as children, saw it eaten, are still willing to talk about it. And at least one scholar believes it is important to listen.

"Funerary" or "mortuary" cannibalism, as anthropologists call it, is not unique to the Wari', or even to South America. But in a new book, Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society (University of Texas Press), Beth A. Conklin argues that the Wari' may offer the last and best chance to study how that practice once helped people cope with the loss of their loved ones.

The mortuary cannibalism of the Wari' arose from their interconnected cultural beliefs about family, food, hunting, memory, the body, and the afterlife. As repulsive as Wari' death rituals are to Western sensibilities, Ms. Conklin believes they illuminate universal truths of the human condition. Understanding that, she says, means overcoming Western misconceptions about anthropophagy -- the eating of human flesh.

"It is assumed that cannibalism is inevitably an act of violence, aggression, degradation against the people who are eaten," says Ms. Conklin, an associate professor of anthropology at Vanderbilt University who lived among the Wari' for 18 months in the mid-1980's and has since returned for three visits. Like other cannibalistic peoples, the Wari' treated enemies killed in battle like so much butchered meat. But the funeral rites for their own kind reflected only reverence.

"Rather than treat cannibalism as a bizarre practice that has nothing to do with us," she says, "I'd like people to see that cannibalism can be an act of love and respect."

Or as a Wari' elder would say, "I felt sorry for he who had died. That is why I ate him."

Dwelling deep in the Amazon jungle, the Wari' remained virtually unknown to Europeans until the 1950's. With Christian missionaries and government workers in the 1960's came measles, mumps, tuberculosis, and other deadly afflications to which the Wari' had no natural resistance. Decimated by disease and dependent on outsiders for food and medicine, they gave in to demands that they abandon their anthropophagic funeral rites.

When she came to do fieldwork for her dissertation in medical anthropology, says Ms. Conklin, scholars considered the Wari' so acculturated as to be "boring" -- and hence, they were little-studied. She originally intended to investigate how an indigenous culture had coped with the disruption caused by serial epidemics. After interviewing dozens of Wari' who had lived through that time, however, she was surprised how many expressed nostalgia for the old way of dealing with grief.

"They want to distance themselves from a sense of loss," Ms. Conklin says, "and transform their memories of their dead relatives in ways that are more helpful in the process of achieving eventual tranquility."

For one thing, burial is a poor alternative. To this day, they regard the jungle soil as cold, wet, and polluting, says Ms. Conklin, and hence disrespectful of the dead. More important, she writes in her book, "the eradication of the corpse was intended to help loosen ties that bind the living and the dead too tightly. Wari' are keenly aware that prolonged grieving makes it hard for mourners to get on with their lives."

"When the body was eaten," Wari' elders often told her, "we did not remember or long for the dead person much." Indeed, the scholar describes anthropophagy as just one step in a process of emotional recovery that might last a year. Then as now, Wari' mourned the death of a family member with several days of public crying, keening, and eulogizing in song.

But blood relatives and the widowed spouse almost never took part in the consumption of the dead person. That taboo seems rooted in the Wari' belief that close kin literally share blood; eating a relative would be tantamount to selling their blood. Understanding that, she says, means overcoming Western misconceptions about cannibalism.

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The blood-relative taboo meant that Wari' in-laws took charge of the funeral rites. After several days of public grieving, they disembowelled the corpse and roasted it over a large fire. When it was cooked, the dead person's blood relatives beseached their reluctant in-laws to eat the roasted flesh, liver, brains, and heart.

That resistance was no polite reflex. Children were usually cooked soon after death, but adults were eulogized for several days, so their decomposing bodies were barely palatable. Out of duty, the in-laws choked down what they could and incinerated the rest. They tried not to touch the meat directly, instead eating off wooden sticks similar to cocktail toothpicks.

Although the practices varied among different groups of Wari', in some villages the bones were ground into dust and consumed with wild honey.

In exceptional circumstances, blood relatives did partake of the flesh. Grandchildren could eat token bits of brain from dead grandparents, the Wari' told Ms. Conklin, so they would retain some memory of them. And illegitimate babies born to very young girls were sometimes rejected by the mother's family and killed at birth. To underscore that rejection, the mother's kin ate the bodies with little more regard for them than they would have held for game animals.

The rituals of disposal did not stop at the body. Even today, the Wari' incinerate every object associated with their dead, including their clothes, their dwellings, and the food they had helped cultivate or collect. If the person dies anywhere in the jungle, the survivors burn off the area where the death occurred. Even the names of the dead and recollections of their deeds are obliterated from conversation.
The purpose of these customs is not so much to erase the dead as to transform their relationship to the living. Otherwise, cremation would have suited Wari’ purposes just as well. First, Ms. Conklin was told, the Wari’ believe it is vital to create new memories of the dead person to supplant the old, something that many of the elders still think can be achieved only by watching them be consumed.

Second, the consumption of flesh reflected the range of religious and cultural meanings that Wari’ invested, and still invest, in the human body. For example, cannibalism reflected the permeable boundary between human and animal. Although human bodies were prepared for consumption in a more respectful manner than were game animals, eating them blurred the distinction between the two.

After death, the Wari’ believe, the human spirit moves on to an underwater afterworld. There it is reincarnated as a fish or a white-lipped peccary, a sort of wild pig that the Wari’ hunt for meat. The Wari’ believe that dead relatives, in an act of love, return to be hunted and killed as food — a kind of double cannibalism.

Fortunately for the Wari’, mortuary cannibalism was never crucial to their understanding of how the universe works. So four decades after abandoning the practice, their cosmology is intact.

“Cannibalism seems to have been primarily aimed at transforming the relationship between the living and the dead in emotional and psychological terms,” says Ms. Conklin. “At the core of the problem that death confronts us with is the problem of attachments, the emotional attachments to the people who passed away. Wari’ identify memory and the physicality of human relationships as problems in the process of coming to terms with the death of a loved one. I think these are near-universal issues with which many people can identify.”

The Wari’ believe, for example, that endless remembering leads to endless sorrow, Ms. Conklin writes, which can incapacitate the bereaved. So, for months after a death, grieving relatives are expected to perform intense “memory work” — private meditation and recollecting of the dead person’s life, filtered through the certain knowledge that the deceased is never coming back.

That custom has its parallel in Freud’s theory of melancholia and other Western psychological notions. In Freudian terms, the eradication of the body and working through memories may bring about a necessary “detachment.” But now the Wari’, Ms. Conklin believes, deprived of the traditional mourning ritual, “think more about the bodies lying alone under a mound in the jungle.”

During her first visit to the Wari’, Ms. Conklin saw a woman in her 50’s nearly waste away, refusing to eat after the death of a young niece. “She only thinks about the ones who died,” said her nephew. Eventually, Brazilian health workers whisked her to a hospital.

Ms. Conklin saw a Wari’ grandmother named Tocohwet Pijo’ grow despondent after the death of a young neighbor and suffer a relapse of tuberculosis. Her relatives, too, said that the recent death had triggered a relapse of another kind: severe depression over long-dead kin, particularly a granddaughter, Inacio, who had died in Rio de Janeiro of bronchitis.

Inacio’s mother, too, harbored unusual bitterness over her daughter’s fate. Breaking the Wari’ taboo, she reminisced about her daughter, and she had covertly saved photographs of her and some of her clothing. These she showed to the anthropologist while denouncing the health-care authorities who had taken Inacio to the big city for an operation and never returned the body. It was buried in Rio, never to be held in a grieving mother’s lap.

Despite such pathos, Ms. Conklin says her efforts to make Westerners sympathetic to Wari’ cannibalism would be fruitless if it continued today. As it is, her book may yet arouse controversy among scholars who fear that any stigma of savagery leaves the Wari’ vulnerable to further oppression.

Willaim Arens, an anthropologist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, has argued for 20 years that Western accounts of cannibalism throughout history have rarely been more than hearsay, and usually serve to demonize indigenous peoples. “If it is not validated by direct observation, then you'd be a fool to accept it, even if your informants tell you it happened,” he says. “She is exoticizing these people.”

Ms. Conklin counters that putting “a human face on cannibalism” will have the opposite effect. In the past, she says, anthropologists have preferred to analyze cannibalism for symbolic clues to a culture’s hidden structure. If scholars would only take the Wari’ people’s testimony at face value, she says, Americans would not find their impulses difficult to understand.

In this country, psychologists recommend coping with grief and denial by making a break with past habits and patterns. It just happens that the Wari’ live in such a small society — Santo Andre, one of the largest Wari’ villages, had 190 residents when she first visited in 1985 — that “you can't just change jobs or make new friends.”

In her view, the Wari’ culture has something to teach North Americans. Here, she writes, “the lack of agreed-upon social forms for the behavior of mourners and those with whom they interact makes grief an isolating experience.”

When she first began listening to the Wari’, that was beyond her understanding. Like many budding anthropologists, she did her major fieldwork when she was still young and unschooled in the world. But her 28-year-old brother died suddenly as she was finishing the first draft of her findings, and she found out what it meant to cope without any cultural guidance.

At the funeral, in Iowa, she perceived that she was expected to hide the signs of sorrow. And for the first time, she understood that bereaved kin in Santo Andre did not participate in cannibalism for the same reason she couldn't stomach the salads, casseroles, and desserts that well-meaning neighbors brought to her parents’ house.

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"I don't know if you can understand this, because you have never had a child die," Jimon Maram said quietly. “But for a parent, when your child dies, it's a sad thing to put his body in the earth."

... "It's cold in the earth," Jimon continued, and Quimoin's shoulders trembled. "We keep remembering our child, lying there, cold. We remember, and we are sad." He leaned forward, searching my eyes as if to see whether I could comprehend what he was trying to explain. Then he concluded:

"It was better in the old days, when the others ate the body. Then we did not think about our child's body much. We did not remember our child as much, and we were not so sad.”

Santo André, 1987—from Consuming Grief

That is why I ate him." Dwelling deep in the Amazon jungle, the Wari' remained virtually unknown to Europeans until the 1950's. With Christian missionaries and government workers in the 1960's came measles, mumps, tuberculosis, and other deadly afflictions to which the Wari' had no natural resistance. The Wari' believe that dead relatives, in an act of love, return to be hunted and killed as food -- a kind of double cannibalism. Fortunately for the Wari', mortuary cannibalism was never crucial to their understanding of how the universe works. I miss you, love! When youâ€™re not by my side, the world loses its beauty! Missing you so much! Baby, you are a home for my wounded soul and Iâm homesick now! I want to hold your hand, hold you close, hug you tightly, kiss you softly, and let you rest your head on my chest so that you can hear my heartbeat just for you. I miss you. I dream about holding you close to me and breathe in your scent. I miss you! I canâ€™t figure out why I miss you so much? And I have no idea why my heart wants to see you so much? Maybe, itâ€™s because I love you. Missing you is one of the hardest feelings, I canâ€™t work, I canâ€™t eat, I canâ€™t live my old self. Bring back the happiness and come back I miss you very much! The sweetest part of my day is thinking of you. I miss you love. I do not even have to think about you, now that you are away, you face is the only picture my mind remembers, and your thoughts are the only ones it wants to process. My every action and every step contain precious memories about you. Every little thing I do reminds me of you. I miss you terribly when you are not with me. Bright sunshine makes the day great. A beautiful night is not complete without the moon and stars in the sky. You are what makes me great. I am missing you so much, please come back soon. When you are not with me, my world basically stands still. My sweethear...Â I can not talk, walk, eat, or even breathe. I only want this to end. I want you to come back, baby. Pages Businesses Food & Beverage MISS ME - EAT ME by ครัวคุณเจน. English (US) · Español · Português (Brasil) · Deutsch. Privacy · Terms · Advertising · Ad Choices · Cookies · More. Facebook Â© 2020. Posts. MISS ME - EAT ME by ครัวคุณเจน. April 28 ·.