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## INTRODUCTION

*Like the feud, the idea that others at some  
distance eat human flesh knows no  
beginning and probably will know no end.*

WILLIAM ARENS (1979, 10)

HISTORIANS HAVE A PREDILECTION for footnotes. These additions to an author's text provide verification, supportive information, interesting asides, and promising leads for further investigation. In a way, it was a footnote that prompted me to begin this inquiry.

In reading about Pacific Northwest Coast history over the years, I continually ran across vague, often contradictory references to alleged practices of cannibalism among Northwest Coast Indians. About 20 years ago, I first read Warren Cook's *Flood Tide of Empire* — the classic overview of early Spanish explorations in this part of the world. Commenting on cannibalism, Cook noted that "the topic is the touchiest in northwest coast ethnography" (Warren Cook 1973, 190). In a long footnote, the historian listed more than 20 sources that warranted reexamination. The subject sounded fascinating and appeared to need thorough study, but at the time I was preoccupied with other projects. I filed the intriguing footnote for future reference.

In 1990, I started research for a book about a late eighteenth-century Spanish-Mexican mariner, who participated in many of

Spain's key expeditions to the Pacific Northwest Coast. Once again I found myself revisiting the old commentaries about cannibalism by Captain James Cook and his men, by English and American fur traders, and by Spanish mariners and priests. The more I probed these references, the more confusing this part of the historical record became. I also found many more sources than those listed by Warren Cook in his provocative footnote. I decided it was time for me to gather all the accounts, analyze them, and render a well-balanced judgment about the central question: Did the early Northwest Coast natives practise cannibalism, and if so, what was the dominant motivation behind it — survival, dietary enhancement, or religious ritual?

As I collected the historical documentation, I realized it would be impossible to understand or appreciate the significance of the cannibalistic customs that allegedly occurred among these aboriginal people unless I first looked at the findings of ethnologists and anthropologists who had studied these groups. That reading led me to two additional realizations. First, the historical record was so ethnocentric as to be highly suspect. Second, to probe its true meaning for contemporary society, I would have to examine other complex issues: Where did the cannibal concept come from? What has it meant to different cultures? In cannibalism's ritualistic form, what is its underlying religious significance? If Northwest Coast natives practised *ritual* cannibalism, do the moral and ethical principles behind those ancient ceremonies have any application to today's world?

What began as a straightforward historical study had turned into a complex, interdisciplinary, cross-cultural investigation of a controversy that is at least 200 years old. The cultural clash between Europeans and native people that occurred on America's northwest coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sparked numerous ideological conflicts, which continue to reverberate today. One of the most contentious is the fascinating, perplexing issue of cannibalism — anthropophagy, or literally *man-eating*.

This ancient concept has been misinterpreted and only par-

tially understood by Westerners who have been inclined to forget that, especially with cannibalism, motive means everything. When most of us encounter the word cannibalism, we tend to assume that the only practice being addressed is the one implied by the term's literal meaning: human use of human beings as tasteful, nourishing food. But this is just one of the forms man-eating appears to have assumed in the distant past. Known as *gustatory* or *dietary cannibalism*, it seems to have occurred rarely, if at all, in certain isolated, widely separated, mainly prehistoric cultures.

As we will see, early European travellers claimed that they found cannibalistic practices almost everywhere they ventured in the so-called New World. They applied the term cannibalism to a wide variety of acts that ranged from trophy-taking to human sacrifice, all of which, they believed, indicated human beings were probably being eaten as food. What they repeatedly failed to recognize were more common, but also more private, practices of *ritual cannibalism* — deeply religious ceremonies, rooted in certain ancient cultures, which included simulated or actual eating of human flesh. All involved the belief that eating certain parts of another individual's body could enable the feaster to acquire the other person's essence, increase spiritual power, and even ensure supernatural protection for the group.

Nowhere in the world were these cannibalistic rites so elaborately developed as they were among the Northwest Coast Indians. But the significance of these rituals was missed entirely by eighteenth-century European invaders, most of whom were blinded by ignorance, preconceptions, prejudice, and fears. Preoccupied by acquisitive motives, they made extremely superficial observations about the strange, new societies they encountered. Nothing reflected this bias more starkly than their perception of what appeared to be gustatory cannibalism among indigenous people and their failure to examine, let alone appreciate, ritual cannibalism.

This tunnel vision reflected a "cannibal complex" among our European ancestors. The same disorder continues to cloud our outlook today. We still tend to equate cannibalism only with iso-

lated, culturally restricted acts of eating human flesh. But, in its ritualistic forms, such behaviour — both simulated and actual — conveyed profound metaphors for timeless metaphysical messages about spiritual renewal. Only a few scholars have probed that aspect.

During most of this century, historians and anthropologists have tended to skirt the issue of cannibalism among Northwest Coast natives and gloss over its implications. The probable cause is clear. The documented accounts were clouded by so much ethnocentrism that scholars almost uniformly discounted gustatory cannibalism on the Pacific Northwest Coast. But in their haste to avoid ethnic bias, researchers neglected to give sufficient attention to the presence and importance of ritual cannibalism. From 1900 to 1980, cannibalism had almost become a forbidden topic to scholars writing about Northwest Coast Indians. Since then, the few historians who have addressed the subject stick to the party line: it never happened. Anthropologists tend to say, if it happened, it occurred so far in the past that it can't be studied.

But the historical record about those who lived at the place mistakenly called Nootka by the famous English Captain James Cook forces us to address some crucial questions. Did the Mowachaht ("the people of the deer") who lived at Yuquot eat human flesh? Was the Mowachaht's legendary Chief Maquinna — the most powerful of all Nootka leaders — a cannibal? Did other Northwest Coast natives engage in the practice? In any of these cases, what type of cannibalism was involved? Were the European explorers duped by natives into making gross exaggerations? Or were they simply biased in their views of all native peoples? Was the moral outrage exhibited by some Europeans actually an attempt to justify their exploitation of native people and cover up their abuse of aboriginal women and children? Did the suspicion that others were "man-eaters" only reinforce European convictions of moral and cultural superiority and blind these observers to the true significance of imagined atrocities? These are only some of the questions that remain unresolved.