

Eating the dead in Madagascar

G Campbell, PhD

Gwyn Campbell holds a Canada Research Chair in Indian Ocean World History at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. Born in Madagascar, he holds degrees in economic history from the universities of Birmingham and Wales and has taught in India (Voluntary Service Overseas) as well as at universities in Madagascar, the UK, South Africa, Belgium and France. His current research focuses on the foundations of the Indian Ocean world global economy, as well as slavery, migration and diasporas in the Indian Ocean world.

Corresponding author: G Campbell (gwyn.campbell@mcgill.ca)

Cannibalism has been poorly understood and has seldom been studied, since it was often suppressed by missionaries and colonial administrators, and very few societies still practise it. Cannibalistic practices are more complex than was originally thought. They may be supported in societies under stress or in times of famine, to reflect aggression and antisocial behaviour (in cases where the bodies of enemies killed in battle or people who have harmed the family are eaten), or to honour a dead kinsman. It was, for example, noted in Madagascar during the imperial campaigns of Ranaivalona I in the period 1829 - 1853. Two types of cannibalism have been described: exocannibalism, where enemies were consumed, and endocannibalism, where dead relatives were eaten to assist their passing to the world of the ancestors, or to prolong contact with beloved and admired family members and absorb their good qualities. This article reviews some of the beliefs and motivations that surrounded the cannibalistic practices of the people of Madagascar in the 19th century.

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Cannibalistic tradition in Imerina (Madagascar)

The old man stated:

'According to that which was reported, in former times, when a person died, all the members of the family were summoned; and when all were present, the head of the family spoke, saying: "Our beloved [relative] has just died! What are we going to do with him? For he was, for us all, a charming and highly agreeable relative." Then, certain people spoke up, stating: "If our dearly beloved is dead, we will not bury him, but will eat him, for it will be distressing to think of our dearly beloved rotting underground." So ... they ate the remains of the deceased. However, the kings ate only the remains of other kings ... Only the *hova* [ordinary caste] consumed [non-royal] human remains ... [Until] one day, the son of a very wealthy man died. The entire family were summoned. When all were present, the relatives thus assembled spoke saying: "All of us are present; start the usual custom, for night is falling." The father of the deceased spoke in his turn, saying:

"Do so! If the family wish so to do, then I also wish it. However, if they don't agree, then neither do I. What would you think, ladies and gentlemen, if with your consent, I substituted bullocks for the body of my son, for I am feeling truly grief-stricken and would like to keep it. However, I wish that everyone agree to my proposition, and should the majority not accept, then I will also reject it." The people considered the proposition, for it would be innovatory to replace the corpse. The family were still pondering the affair when dawn broke. Then, they declared: "The proposition is, perhaps, acceptable ... the suffering that one feels for a [lost] child is one known to all; everyone feels grief for a dear one ... So, a large number of cattle will be substituted for the remains of the dead son because his father was rich; and the bullocks will be eaten instead of the corpse. And this meat will be called *henaratsy* [bad meat] because, before this, the mortal remains [of the dead] were eaten and this was bad."^[1]

I first met Trefor Jenkins around 1990. I had been working on the history of Madagascar and was increasingly intrigued by the mystery surrounding the origins of the Malagasy and the initial human settlement of the island. I had read of some of Trefor's work on early human populations in southern Africa, and approached him for his opinion of the Malagasy. The ensuing discussions led to a collaborative National Geographic project, under Trefor's leadership, that resulted in the publication of a paper offering for the first time genetic proof that all major Malagasy ethnicities carried both Austronesian and African genetic traits. We continued our academic collaboration and became excellent friends. Trefor has always had a fascination with the cultures of the people he has studied, including cannibalism, so I thought this offering on a little-known history of endocannibalism in Madagascar would accord with this interest.

This apparent reference to cannibalism among the Merina of Madagascar, derived by the Catholic priest Callet,^[1] possibly from writer-interpreter Lucien Andriamiseza (1913 - 1997),^[2] when transcribing the collection of indigenous oral traditions known as *Tantaran' ny Andriana* ('History of the Kings'), attracted little attention until 1956, when Louis Molet,^[3] a French Protestant missionary and anthropologist, published a work in which he claimed that the Merina, in common with the other ethnicities of Madagascar, practised funeral rites that demonstrated clear signs of having once been focused around the eating of the dead. His book provoked considerable public controversy in Imerina, and received negative reviews from intellectuals such as Louis Michel^[4] and Maurice Bloch,^[5] who followed earlier authors, including Alfred and Guillaume Grandidier^[6] and Raymond Decary,^[2] who alluded to, but summarily rejected, the alleged tradition of funereal cannibalism among the Merina. All have insisted that Callet's note – on which he did not elaborate – should not be taken at face value, and was either mistaken or a metaphor indicating the symbiotic relationship of the living and the ancestors.

The nature of cannibalism

Cannibalism has been poorly understood because the practice was suppressed by missionaries and colonial officials, and there remain very few societies that still practise it. Researchers have therefore tended to consider the practice in symbolic terms, notably to reflect aggression and antisocial behaviour.^[7] In cannibalistic societies people would generally eat the bodies of enemies killed in battle or of individuals who had harmed members of their families (e.g. Young^[8] and Stewart and Strathern^[9]), a ritual also allegedly practised by some communities in southern and western Madagascar.^[2,10]

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that cannibalistic practices are far more complex than was originally thought. For example, cannibalism was practised almost universally in societies under severe and sustained stress, notably in times of famine, as in 1259, when cannibalism was rife in Kyoto, Japan;^[11] in Mchenge, Central China, in the early 1350s;^[12] in Persia in mid-1871;^[13] during the great famine of 1030 - 1033 in France; and on the French retreat from Moscow in 1812.^[14] It was also noted in Madagascar during the imperial campaigns of Ranavalona I of Imerina in the period 1829 - 1853, both among the Taisaka on the southeast littoral of the island, and the Ikongo of the southeast plateau who ate Merina captives during a prolonged siege of their hilltop fortress.^[2]

Endocannibalism

In addition, distinctions need to be drawn between exocannibalism, in which enemies were consumed, and endocannibalism, in which dead relatives were eaten. Exocannibalism is an extension of enmity towards outsiders, who are killed and consumed in a disrespectful, hostile manner. In contrast, endocannibalism involves the eating of near kin in rituals intended to honour and respect the dead, and assist in their passage to the world of the ancestors.^[7] The positive aspect of endocannibalism was stressed by 19th-century Merina elders who claimed that their funereal cannibalism 'did not have its origin in barbarism, but in the greatest affection for the deceased.'^[15] Indeed, Molet relates that when Rainilaiarivony, the prime minister of pre-colonial Madagascar, died a prisoner of the French in Algiers in July 1896, and the French removed his internal organs for examination, Jules Rakotohavana, his former slave, asked that he might eat them on the grounds that:

eating the flesh of the beloved dead was still practiced, that this custom should not be considered as a cannibalistic act but rather prove of his love and amity for the deceased, and that it was known that in tasting these remains, he would absorb an intelligence and heart of gold similar to those of Rainilaiarivony. (Vasé as cited in Molet^[16])

And while not proof that endocannibalism also existed in Sakalava land, in the west of Madagascar, the striking report of botanists Hilsenberg and Bojer in 1823 certainly hints at it:

General Brady has informed us, that in the country of the Saccatawa [Sakalava] he has frequently seen the children scraping the flesh from their parents' bones with the same knife as they used to cut their food, and drying the bones and skulls at the same fire as is then employed for the purpose of cookery. (Hilsenberg and Bojer, 1823, as cited in Hooker^[17])

An additional reason for the generally dismissive rejection of Molet's thesis was the conventional view of Francophone specialists of Malagasy history, following the Grandidiers, that the Merina, especially of the *andriana* caste, were an evolved people of pure or almost pure Austronesian (Javanese/Malay) descent, who were superior to the other *métis* peoples of Madagascar. Thus Guillaume Grandider wrote that of the island's 'divers tribes one proved itself

more intelligent, better disciplined and more powerful than the others ... This is the people known as Hova [Merina]^[2,18] (see also Grandidier and Grandidier^[19]). However, notions of the genetic distinctiveness of the Merina were removed by the findings of a team led by Trefor Jenkins, which in 1996 published the first definitive proof that all Malagasy were of mixed Austronesian and (Bantu) African descent.^[20] This, and the distinctions made by Beth Conklin between exo- and endocannibalism,^[7] makes the issue of funereal endocannibalism in Madagascar worth re-visiting.

Of particular note here is the widely reported tradition of endocannibalism practised in Betsileo, the highland province immediately to the south of Imerina:

Many Betsileo 'ray-aman-dreny' [respected elders] who had reached a very advanced age, informed us that they had been told by their ancestors that during funerals in Betsileo, well before the reign of Ralambo in Imerina [ruled from circa 1575 - 1610] ... some families would consume the flesh of their relative's corpse instead of burying it. They were not able to specify to us if it was a custom practised throughout the region, or only something practised frequently in a few places. According to tradition, these practices were justified as follows. In very ancient times, the family formed a strong and coherent unit unified by a deep attachment to its leader, the 'ray-aman-dreny', whose authority was revered and uncontested. The ethnic group, spared from diseases that arrived later from the exterior, were healthy and deaths infrequent. The bonds that linked the members of the same family were so vibrant that, when one member should die, the survivors wished to prolong contact with their dead relative by every magical and esoteric means they could summon. According to these very old principles, in absorbing the physical substance of the deceased, they also absorbed his spirit. In this way, the family unit and its qualities remained the same.^[4] (see also Molet^[3])

The endocannibalism practised by the Betsileo thus guaranteed the community the continued presence and blessing of the ancestors – something assured in the 19th-century Merina *fandroana* or 'New Year' festival (which Molet claims replaced traditional endocannibalistic practices) when every person was obliged to sacrifice cattle (the number slaughtered reflecting the wealth and status of the deceased). The meat of the sacrificed cattle was called *henaratsy* ('bad meat') and consumed generally by the kin of the deceased, but not by his nearest relatives^[4] – a taboo also present in Betsileo.^[3] Similarly, in the endocannibalism practised by some South American communities, intimate kin – those for whom incest taboos applied – did not eat the flesh of the deceased, as that would have been akin to eating oneself, and therefore fatal.^[7]

Passage to the afterlife

For South American practitioners of endocannibalism, the ritual was necessary to assist the deceased to pass into the world of the ancestors. This world was populated by beings who lived, reproduced, and visited their living relatives. In the case of the hunter-gather Wari, the ancestors returned in the form of animals who, in an act of blessing and reciprocity, led their living relatives (hunters) to the animal quarry upon which they depended.^[7]

While most 19th-century Betsileo did not practise endocannibalism, they did observe a practice whereby, after death, members of the royal family and their descendants were reincarnated in animal form. Possibly the earliest mention of this was by the Protestant missionary James Richardson^[21] in 1875:

The third day after death the body swells; it is then taken from the coffin, and rolled upon planks until it becomes all of a pulp.

On the fourth day another ox is killed, and the skin from that and those killed previously are cut up into long strips. The corpse is then held upright against the beam of the house, an incision is made in the heel of each foot, and all the putrid liquid matter is collected in a large earthen pot or pots, and when nothing is left scarcely but skin and bone, the corpse is strapped to the beam and there left. Great care is taken of these pots, and the corpse cannot be removed from the house until a small worm appears in one of them; this sometimes takes two or three months in appearing. The worm is allowed to grow a little; then the body may be buried, and the killing of oxen is increased. The body is then buried with much state, and the earthen pot in which is this worm is placed into the grave too, and a long bamboo is put in the pot, an opening being left at the top of the tomb through which this bamboo protrudes. After six or eight months, this worm climbs up the bamboo, and makes its appearance in the town. It is called *fanano*; and is of lizard shape. Then come the relations of the dead, who approach this lizard, saying: 'Art thou so and so?' If it lifts its head, that is an infallible sign that it is he or she. The plate the deceased last ate off is fetched, an ox's ear is cut, and the blood on the knife is carried along with some rum on the plate and placed before this *fanano*, and should it eat the blood and drink the rum then no more doubt can be entertained as to the identity of the thing. 'Let us then go into the house' the people say, and a clean cloth is laid on the ground, the *fanano* steps upon the cloth, and is carried amid great rejoicing, killing of oxen, and feasting, into the town. After this the *fanano* is carried back to the tomb, where it remains, grows to an enormous size, and for ever remains the guardian of the town.^[21]

Possibly related to this tradition is the common belief that certain types of intestinal worms (*Enterobius vermicularis*) are beneficial, called 'guardians of life' and considered to remain in the body until death approaches.^[16] Other traditions report the *fanano* being carried to, and emerging from, a lake; and of it having seven heads.^[22] By the end of the 19th century, the Betsileo *fanano* belief and ritual had spread to the neighbouring Tanala of the great eastern forest.^[23] Ralph Linton,^[23] probably following the tradition of Vaissière,^[15] referred to the animal reincarnation of the deceased as 'a large snake apparently of the boa family'. The Tambahoaka and other peoples influenced by Islamic beliefs on the south-east coast believed that liquids produced by decay of a chief's corpse resulted in the appearance of a large sea-serpent.^[22]

In mythology, lizards and snakes are commonly linked to crocodiles. Among the Ekoi of West Africa, the cult of the snake is closely associated with that of crocodiles, which are believed to be sacred guardian spirits of the Lake of the ancestral spirits.^[22] The Malagasy generally have a superstitious dread of the crocodile. The Zafindravoay clan of the Antandroy in southern Madagascar believe themselves to be descendants of a sexual union between a crocodile and an Antandroy woman, while Flacourt^[10] recounts the story that the Malagasy princess Zafiramini gave birth to a crocodile. This, according to Claude Allibert,^[24] is a clear indication of the belief, derived from Austronesia, that the ancestors live on in animal, notably crocodile, form. There are a number of *fady* (taboos) associated with the crocodile. Many considered it *fady* to

kill a crocodile. James Sibree^[25] reported that the Antankarana, in the extreme north of Madagascar, believed that the spirits of their chiefs passed into crocodiles, and those of inferior people into other animals, while one Zafindravoay clan living among the northern Tsimihety accorded to crocodiles the same funeral rites as they did to humans. The Zafindravoay refuse to kill crocodiles, to which they formerly gave the lungs of all slaughtered cattle, and which they believe would not harm them^[26] (see also Chapelier^[27]).

In sum, when David Griffiths, longest-serving member of the first London Missionary Society mission to Madagascar, stated that the Merina had a common saying that 'as the white men possess neither cattle nor sheep in their homeland, they come here to purchase captives in order to fatten and slaughter them instead of animals,'^[28] he may not necessarily, as is conventionally believed, have been implying that the Merina did not practise cannibalism because they possessed cattle and sheep to provide meat. In fact, cattle and sheep were traditionally rare and highly valued in Imerina, where they were generally only consumed on important ritual occasions such as funerals where the *henaratsy* played a pivotal role.

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