An Account Of The Exchange Of Corpses Between Tribes For Mutual Gain

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The WEIRDos I have met in realspace and online do not seem often to think about cannibalism.[1]

If cannibalism arrives in conversation, usually the concept is so barbarian that the conversation does not proceed further than fuzzy acknowledgements of cannibalism as an abandoned and esoteric relic of pre-industrial Man or as a forced, grotesque outcome of a tradegy (e.g. in the Donner Party).

In reading old Western travel logs and ethnographies, I encounter accounts of cannibalism frequently; one instance that especially caught my attention was on page 212-213 of Captain Guy Burrow's 1903 book *The Curse Of Central Africa* (**burrows1903curse?**).

> Among the riverside tribes, who live chiefly in their dug-outs for months at a time, fishing and curing their fish, regular rules of etiquette concerning the disposal of their dead friends exist. If in two villages, say a quarter of a mile away from each other, any member of one community dies, the body is promptly placed in a canoe and taken to the other village, where it is handed over to supply a banquet for the chief and his friends. The compliment, of course, is returned when a member of the other village likewise fulfills the debt of nature. Quarrels between villages are frequent, generally ending in a settlement by force of arms. Two or three men being killed on each side, peace is restored, and preparations promptly made for the ensuing banquet, each side taking over the slain of their opponents to furnish the feast.
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> That the native thinks there is no harm in cannibalism there can be no doubt. It comes as natural to him to eat the flesh of a human being as it does to Europeans to eat beef or mutton; and he certainly emphasises the point that the flesh of man is superior to that of other animals. He prefers that of the white to the black, because Europeans are accustomed to the habitual use of salt, which of course the native does not use.
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> A curious incident occurred to myself as regards these banquets. Two villages having quarrelled, agreed to settle their differences with a friendly fight; they proceeded to business, with the result that four men on one side were killed and two on the other. Peace being declared, inquiries were instituted to ascertain the number of dead on each side. When it was found that the proportion was two to four, the village losing the greater number promptly claimed two more victims to equalize the account. It was agreed to refer the matter to the arbitration of the white man commanding the post, who naturally informed them that they must abide by the result of the patched-up peace. These chiefs, being much disgusted with the result of the appeal to the justice of the white man, waited until my arrival to again place the matter before myself, hoping that the former verdict would be reversed. Their was disgust

[1] There are more pressing matters in life, of course, than reading ethnography or history, and my attention is taken up so much by discussions like this or this; my reading of arcane and temporally distant things for pleasure is a small hedge against regretting not having learned more about humanity before there is no longer time or life to.

> was only increased when I informed them that, in the event of hearing of any further disputes being settled in a similar manner, the chiefs on both sides would be severely punished and the villages heavily fined.

A mutual arrangement between two nearby peoples, where one group passes via canoe to the other any of their members' corpses and vice versa, for consumption, is simply amazing to me.

There are many means of mythologically or ritually rationalizing certain behaviors (e.g. Naskapi Innu scapulimancy, i.e. heating a caribou shoulder blade and "reading" the cracks to decide where to hunt); however, to situate myself in a sociobiological scenario where I would be excited to received or would find useful a corpse from my neighbor for feasting is very difficult!

Anyway, I thought I would share this (possibly) hyperlocal wonder of the past.