

Meatify the Weak! Cannibalism and (Post) Colonial Politics

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Case One: Postcolonial Cannibalism

In 1999 I performed ethnographic research for a period of three months in Jakarta, Indonesia. At the time the country was on its way to its first democratic elections. It was a pandemonium of political change, most people were obviously very excited about their new-born right to vote freely, and, as Fealy noted '... the public appeared eager to participate in party politics. Thousands of party branches were established across the country and millions of people flocked to join new parties and attend political rallies' (2001, 100). Especially those issues that were not talked of before (because general Soeharto dictatorial rule simply forbid it) were now high on the agenda. Much discussion concerned the concept like culture (in Indonesian *budaya*, the motherland).

With its 220 million inhabitants spread over a few thousand islands, Indonesia, a product of colonialism, has a matchless number of minority cultures. Jakarta, its capital, serves as its fulcrum, especially in postcolonial times when the city of freedom (as it was named after the Dutch colonizers had left) had turned into the centre of everything, and houses all minorities. The city is the motor of Indonesia's economy (money is made here, investments from companies and governments are done here) one could even say that consequential to their dependence on Jakarta, all of these minorities today have been redefined by Jakarta's urban logic.

Concerning these issues, I interviewed¹ an influential and well-known character in recent Indonesian socio-political history, and a major advocate of democracy: Haryati Soebadio, a woman with a long and impressive career in Indonesian politics. For a long time she was head of the cultural attaché when one day, the then President, the earlier mentioned General Soeharto, called her to his office and told her that she would be the next Minister of Social Affairs. This was an important position, as it was her task to give form to Indonesia's idea of 'unity in diversity' (as the national anthem still declares). Although she was much more interested in the arts and the cultural past of Indonesia, having studied these in her former function (as a university professor), Soebadio could not refuse to become the Minister of Social Affairs; she was not too enthusiastic,

¹ Interview with Haryati Soebadio, 29 May 1999, Jakarta, Indonesia.

because she had to function under an autocratic regime. Nevertheless, she proved to be one of the humane faces of the Soeharto bureaucracy, which explains her enduring popularity, and a major spokesperson when it comes to discussing issues like cultural identity.

We talked for several hours about what democracy in a country like Indonesia should be like, how one could be open to cultural (racial) differences and how a postcolonial state, housing so many different peoples, could do justice to all these different voices. Having a background in anthropology herself, one of her contributions to Indonesia's cultural policy was to hire anthropologists to assist her while she visited those often isolated, minority groups deep in the forest. Contrary to Soeharto's denial of cultural differences (which, in his view, could do nothing but harm to Indonesia's fragile unity), she played an important role in introducing it in Indonesia's state politics. As she pointed out:

Before I got to visit a region in my country, I sent two anthropologists ahead to find out something about their culture, because I, as Minister of Social Affairs, felt somewhat obligated to adjust myself to their way of living. I felt that this was part of my job; to have respect for the way those people lived, even if I had some difficulty with that personally.

I asked her to give me an example of what she, as Minister of Social Affairs, considered a 'difficult' cultural habit. She related a striking case of a village in the inner lands of Kalimantan the Indonesian part of the island of Borneo, a poorly developed area with low demographic density. The rumor was that some of the tribes in this area were still cannibalistic. Then she said:

Although my anthropologists did not find any trace of that, I was curious so I asked a "*kepala desa*" [village chief, author's translation] whether this was true. He told me that cannibalism was not practiced in his village, but that he was not sure about the other settlements in this area. But he could tell me one thing though; that in one language the word for "meat" is the same as the word they use for "neighbour".

This was a very unexpected turn in our conversation, especially in relation to our theme; ethnic minorities in Indonesia. We had discussed cultural background, talking about the role a new-born democratic state should play in guaranteeing the values of these cultures, while at the same time trying to some kind of national unity, a 'unified territory', some kind of bond that would make all these people truly feel 'Indonesian' (which is indeed a very big problem). Now, all of a sudden, we were talking about 'cannibalism'. I was under the impression that this subject was perhaps a hot topic in historical anthropology, and maybe in psychoanalysis and film-studies, but not in contemporary political debate.

In contemporary global politics, those representing the state and figureheads of opinion have not been discussing the supposed cannibalistic habits of particular

(racial) minority groups within their respective countries for a long time. Once in a while we read small newspaper articles in which cannibalism is related to extreme famine, to sectarian religious ceremonies and slightly odd singular events (think for instance of Armin Meiwes, the 'Rotenburg Cannibal' who in 2002 caused an international stir for eating Bernd Jürgen Brandes (who actually volunteered)). However, these days we never read stories in which man-eating is an accepted custom in a particular cultural group. In Europe, in the Middle Ages, the Jews were incriminated of cannibalistic preferences (they were accused of everything the Christian majority considered morally wrong). In addition, in the early ages of colonialism but especially in the nineteenth century, non-Western groups have recurrently been suspected of man-eating habits. In fact, as Sanday (1986) rightfully notes, those were the days that practically every group encountered was accused of this practice. But times have changed. At least in Western dominated state discourse, there are no recent examples to be found in which cultural groups and racial minorities were accused of cannibalism. The idea that cannibalism exists as an excepted social practice, seems to be a relic of the past.

This was not the case in Indonesia. Besides its introduction in the conversation with Soebadio, other, less formal, conversations I had during the time I had left in Indonesia revealed that cannibalism still played a vital role in discussions on minority identity and the degree of freedom that should be given to the different peoples living across the archipelago and wanting to keep their disputed habits alive. In popular media, the *Toba-Batak*, a predominantly Christian (not unimportant keeping in mind the recent Islamist/nationalist movements) people living near the Toba Lake in central Sumatra, were increasingly accused of cannibalism (see also Causey 2003, 81). Also, emphasizing this topic, many of my discussants could easily come up with names of (other) peoples that the state should keep an eye on if it takes its intention of becoming a free and democratic society seriously.

Haryati Soebadio's reaction to this event tells us unmistakably how cannibalism should be considered a part of the political discourse. After telling this story to me, we laughed because of the awkward equation (neighbor = meat), but in the end this was quite a serious problem that she was confronted with, in her belief. She told me she was relieved to leave the area safe and sound, and, if she hadn't been an official, she would have considered this strange story just an interesting puzzle for ethnologists and linguists. However, being Minister of Social Affairs, and the one person responsible for Indonesia's 'unity in diversity' ideal, she believed she was confronted with problems that not many of her colleagues from the Western world were or are familiar with. She was not pleased to hear the rumor that there were particular cultural/racial groups within her country that seemed to play with the idea of eating others. 'Cannibalism is not a good ingredient for a civil society, for a new democracy to emerge', she stated.

Case Two: Colonial Cannibalism

These experiences from Indonesia need some further thinking about, not so much because of the peculiar equation (neighbor = meat), but more because of the link being established between cannibalism, racial identity, territorial politics, and state formation. It poses important questions to mainstream anthropological literature. In particular, I am interested in how these supposedly cannibalistic groups are conceptualized by the state, by the powerful, and how this comes with a particular philosophy of (conquered, conquerable or to be conquered) land. Indeed, my discussion of race, geography, and food is one primarily concerned with the most brutal and radical politics of consumption.

To understand the means of politics in this perspective, let us first turn to how anthropology has been discussing cannibalism recently. Today's discussion started in 1979 when William Arens published his noted book, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*. In the same year, Bernadette Bucher wrote an article entitled '*Les fantasmes du conquérant*' [The fantasies of the conqueror]. Both scholars argue that the concept of cannibalism, as we now know it, is predominantly a product of colonial imagination; calumny imposed by European colonizers (Hulme 1998, 3) upon the colonized in order to justify the use of violence and to gain control. The figure of the cannibal was used as the racist archetype of the savage, the amoral, the irrational primitive, and this figure needed to be controlled by the western state. Arens and Bucher both claim that the practice of eating men has *never* been an accepted social phenomenon. Cannibalism is, in the end, a tool of the powerful, a fantasy made up by the conqueror in order to legitimate their rule, as Bucher posed it so convincingly. Cannibalism is not a sociological or anthropological concept, but a political tool used in order to institutionalize a racial difference. This racial difference, similar to the installation of biological, moral and social differences, effectuates the opposition between the civilized (territorial) State and the barbarian (nomadic) cannibals for political purposes.

Not surprisingly, the argument posed by Arens and Bucher caused great disturbances in anthropological and postcolonial academic circles, most vigorously by Rivi re and Brady (the former even called Arens monograph a 'bad' and 'dangerous' book (1980, 205). But also major names such as Edmund Leach, Marvin Harris and Marshall Sahlins seemed to have great difficulties with the idea that cannibalism is nothing more than a screen for imperialist violence. Nevertheless, together with the declining popularity of biological racism (at least within academia), more and more scholars became convinced of their arguments and added new historical and ethnographical data that supported Arens' and Bucher's claim, with the result that the idea of cannibalism as a political instrument of suppression is, accepted by the majority of scholars.

Let me give you a more detailed reading of Arens and Bucher's argument by revisiting briefly one particularly famous historical case, widely discussed in the 'cannibalistic' literature. It concerns a fragment from an interesting text by Peter

Martyr on cannibals in the Caribbean. Martyr was an influential humanist who had never set foot in the Caribbean, but claimed to base his writings on a diary of Dr Diego Alvarez Chanca, who seems to have been part of Columbus' second Caribbean voyage (in 1493). Encasing a drawing from a cooking pot and some scattered limbs, the following text is printed:

It was in this village of Guadeloupe that they first discovered the ravages and wrecks of cannibalism. Human bones were plentifully scattered around the houses. In the kitchens were found skulls in use as bowls and vases. In some of the houses the evidences of man-eating were still more vividly and horribly present. The Spaniards entered apartments which were veritable human butcher-shops. Heads and limbs of men and women were hung up on the walls or suspended from the rafters, in some instances dripping with blood, and, as if to add, if that were possible, to the horror of the scene, dead parrots, geese, dogs and iguanas were hung up without discrimination or preference with the fragments of human bodies. In a pot some pieces of a human limb were boiling, so that these several evidences it was manifest that cannibalism was not an incidental fact but a common usage, well established and approved in the life of the islanders. (Blaine 1892, 172 in Hulme 1998, 18, 19)

It is most rewarding to read this particular fragment in the light of Peter Hulme's comments on it. He carefully analyzes Martyr's text and minutely discredits what seems to be its central thought (that is, that cannibalism was an accepted social phenomenon in the Caribbean in 1493), by first showing us how distorted Martyr's interpretation of Chanca's writings actually are. Where Chanca (in his original journal) claims to have seen a handful of human bones (that might just as well have been there for funeral purposes, if they were human at all), Martyr has multiplied this image into 'veritable human butcher-shops'. Adding to Chanca's original, Martyr also refurbishes the houses by adding kitchens (featuring the inevitable pot) and sees no harm in claiming that this one story holds 'several evidences' that these brutal cannibalistic practices were in 'common usage', established and approved in the lives of the islanders.

After dismembering Martyr's interpretation of Chanca's writings, Hulme goes further by adding that even the proofs of cannibalism that can be found in the original text can be seriously questioned. His main argument is that Dr Diego Alvarez Chanca, the alleged witness of the scene, was probably not a member of the landing party and thus not an eyewitness. In other words, Chanca reports second hand what is told to him. Additionally, keeping in mind that Columbus' second expedition's working assumption was that the explorers would visit islands inhabited by cannibals, the credibility of the words of the 'eyewitness' can also be seriously contested.

Hulme thus gives us every reason to doubt the factual accuracy of the writings of both Martyr and Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca. In that sense, Hulme's analysis is in line with the claims of Arens and Bucher that no society has embraced cannibalism

as a regular social practice. Hulme also seconds the consequence of Arens' and Bucher's argument when he deduces that cannibalism is thus about politics: it is a racializing myth. Yet, strangely enough, although he makes many references to both writers, especially to Arens, to whose argument he claims to stay close, Hulme's analysis is rather disorderly and incomplete when it comes to revealing the political agenda of Martyr's text. He fails to emphasize strongly enough that, since this second trip to the Caribbean was undertaken in order to visit the islands supposedly inhabited by cannibals, what they truly sought was a way to legitimize colonization. Additionally, by 'finding cannibals', their objectives were achieved, as, according to the received wisdom of the time, poor savages enslaved by their primary passions need a strong state in order to control them, so that in the end they too will lead happy lives. *Homo homini lupus est*. A final comment that needs to be made is that Hulme did not pay attention to the fact that Martyr's interpretation of Chanca's story was printed in a book entitled *Columbus and Columbia: a Pictorial History of the Man and the Nation* (Blaine 1892). This volume celebrated the quarter-century of the state of Columbia, commending state control, and thus had little sympathy for the primitive, savage peoples that inhabited this part of the world prior to its arrival.

Cannibalism is Not the Other

In his ground-breaking book Arens claimed that 'considering "others" as cannibals ... is [a] universal phenomenon' (Arens 1979, 139). With that he meant to say that cannibalism, or at least cannibalism as a socially accepted phenomenon has only existed in the judgment of the outsider. Indeed his claims seem to strive for a universal theory of cannibalism, or rather, for the birth of its myth and the universal politics that were behind it. Buchner makes a slightly different argument. Her refusal to accept cannibalism as a socially accepted phenomenon proposes to reread the myth of cannibalism as a strategy of those in power. And this is actually what we have been looking at in the cases discussed above: both in postcolonial Indonesia and in colonial America we see that cannibalism is used as a strategy of the powerful, a strategy with a clear goal in mind: the ultimate *inclusion* (consumption) of those without power or at least of the land traversed by those without power.

I have already mentioned that also within the borders of Europe, before colonization started, the Jews had actually been accused of cannibalization. In her later work, Bucher (1981) also shows that in medieval Europe, before colonialism took place, a notion of cannibalism was used for political purposes: old women with sagging breasts (symbolizing their infertile state) were believed to have a strong desire for human meat and were accused of cannibalism. Also in colonial times this image of the cannibalistic witch pops up (for instance in the colonization of the Arawak Indians). Interestingly enough, not only shows a racializing politics but also a phallogocentrism to go hand in hand with it.

Actually what cases like those mentioned by Bucher show is that racism – but in the end also cannibalism itself – is not about the creation of an ‘other’ at all. Or at least when it comes down to what we perhaps should call a cannibalism-of-the-state, we see that it is not so much based on the creation of a difference in kind, but much more of a difference in degree. Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their seminal volume *A Thousand Plateaus*, refer to this as European racism. As they put it: ‘Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face ... From the view of racism, there is no exterior, there are no people on the outside’ (1987, 178).

European racism has nothing to do with an ‘other’ but this notion of otherness was used by primitive societies in order to name the stranger. Indeed, looking at views on cannibalism as developed in what they refer to as primitive societies, there is definitely an outside at work. Gananath Obeyesekere (1992), for instance, nicely shows that the persistent questioning by the British as to whether their famous captain, James Cook was eaten by the Hawaiians after his death led the natives to believe that cannibalism must have been the accepted mortuary practice of their visitors. The Hawaiians then considered the British the ‘others’, those outside of their society (because of their supposed cannibalism). Similarly ‘otherness’ is at work with the way the Greek ‘father of ethnography’ Herodotus described the neighbors of the Scythians as *Androphagi* (man-eaters). The Hawaiians and Herodotus, it could be argued, were talking about ‘otherness’ in that they were conceptualizing those who were considered to be situated outside of their society.

The notion of ‘primitive societies’ is today not often used anymore and perhaps needs to be replaced by ‘society without a state apparatus’ (which is also how Deleuze and Guattari used this term). It might be useful to emphasize the absence of the modern state in this perspective because this indeed seems to be of the greatest importance. The modern state, the state as invented in Europe, in Christian Europe, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, makes the difference when it comes to how European racism, and thus colonial and postcolonial cannibalism, are different from these more primitive notions of cannibalism (and perhaps primitive notions of racism). The modern (predominantly nineteenth century) state as it considers land its ‘territory’, its possession, not only defends but necessarily wants to expand its control in every possible direction. Deleuze and Guattari consider this a White Man strategy (referring to Christ) which indeed would explain both the male anthropocentric drives that seem to be essential to this state as it not only always already intended to further its control on Europe (its inside), but at the same time (by means of colonialist and post-colonialist strategies) *has to* incorporate the world.

The way cannibalism is at work in the writings of Martyr and Chanca is exactly how Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize European racism. At the same time however, it is in line with postcolonial Indonesia. Both of these cases have nothing to do with exclusion, as the concept of the ‘other’ suggests. Rather, cannibalism is a stigma, used here in order to produce a state *hierarchy* and to indicate a deviation between racial groups. (Post)-colonial cannibalism then has nothing to do with

man-eating practices, but it also has nothing to do with otherness. It is a tool of state politics. The myth of cannibalism as we discussed it is a myth of the state that thus desires to further organize its interior in terms of territory and racial social hierarchy.

Cannibalism is Not the Signifier

My critique of Arens' use of otherness as a universal strategy in the politics of cannibalism is at the same time a critique on the linguisticism that had an important say in debates on cannibalism since 1979 (see also Sanday 1986). Otherness, so closely connected to difference (in kind), to defining an opposing set of signifiers, seems to reduce 'cannibalism' as a concept to a correlation between a word and a thing (the witch, the raced body, the other possible world). Perhaps in line with how scholars such as Stuart Hall (1997) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (*The Illusions of Race*, 1998 is probably the best example of this thinking), have conceptualized race solely as a signifier, considering any biological explanation false and irrelevant, cannibalism too is nowadays predominantly studied as a 'fearful word'. Kirstin Guest argues '... cannibalism was part of the larger process of European self-definition, a process in which cannibalism was often used as a conclusive signifier of otherness' (2001, 36). Redefining cannibalism as the most radical and ultimate signifier of possession, the term has been used in many branches in academia and outside (for instance advertising) as a metaphor for all radical forms of inclusion or animal desires that come from within.

Not reducing cannibalism to a signifier but rather showing archeologically and ethnographically how this practices is at work, our two cases come with a very different, and, if I may say so, have at least the potential to give a much *richer* and *pragmatic* philosophy of language: one that is radically materialist and immanent and unsusceptible to the kind of 'random reasoning' that signifier enthusiasts, as Deleuze and Guattari call them (1987, 66), tend to practice. In the case of cannibalism, our colonial and postcolonial excursions necessarily lead us to theories of state formation and territorialization, to a notion of difference in degree (a racism) and to what we may call a philosophy of the inside. This radical materialist anthropology through which we conceptualized 'cannibalism' thus *necessarily* comes with a materialist politics that is not descriptive but involves a full series of productive connections.

Rather than conceptualizing cannibalism a priori as an identity politics, our analysis shows in what way it comes with a state politics of territoriality. Deleuze (1990) reminds us of Alice's coronation dinner: you either eat what is presented to you or you are presented to what you eat. Isn't that a very nice miniature of the cannibalistic nature of state politics at the size of a table? Perhaps then also the fact that de Sade considers 'meatiness' a condition of victims only, as Angela Carter notices, explains the difference in degree (and not the difference in kind) we saw at work, both in contemporary Indonesia and in cannibalist literature: Carter reads

this masculine or state hierarchy brilliantly in de Sade whose motto seems to be to '... abuse, exploit and *meatify* the weak' (1992, 140).

At the start of this chapter I mentioned that I was surprised that in contemporary (postcolonial) Indonesia, state politics was still so strongly centered on the conceptualization of cannibalism which is not a major theme in occidental politics. This however does not mean that the strategy to meatify the weak has been abandoned. On the contrary, when George W. Bush only days after 9/11 talked of a 'faceless enemy' a similar European racism is at work. Again, there is no Signifier to be found here. The faceless enemy, the terrorist, is a statement that does not place one group of people opposite or outside of the other (the good against the bad). Rather, the relation between the statement and the act is internal; *in* the statement material reorganizations start to happen, the territory of the state is played upon.

Perhaps we can think of terrorism as yet another strategy to meatify the weak. Of course there are odd and singular events (Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber is in this sense no different from Armin Meiwes, the 'Rotenburg Cannibal' already mentioned above). But terrorism, just like cannibalism, is never an accepted social phenomenon. On the same day Bush gave his farewell speech, David Miliband, Britain's foreign secretary, gave a speech in Mumbai, another former colony and a stage of recent 'terrorist violence' (*The Guardian* 2009), and unmasked the political strategy that was behind the 'War on Terror' all along. In *The Guardian* he claimed that the War on Terror initiated by the statements of George W. Bush *created* terrorism as our enemy. It was a state strategy of inclusion. It was a neoliberal way to meatify the weak. By capturing all kinds of splinter groups under one name *in order to* set up a hierarchy, a difference in degree, a territorialist politics which sets itself to the incorporation and overcoding of another group (race/religion), thus legitimizing domestication by the West, by democracy and, most of all, by the US, Bush invented terrorism, similar to how his fellow statesmen (throughout history and time) use(d) cannibalism in their state politics.

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