

El Dorado, Cannibalism and the Amazons - European Myth and Amerindian Praxis in the Conquest of South America

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The three European myth-cycles concerning the riches of *El Dorado*, that is 'The Golden One', the *Cannibals* who are eaters of human flesh, and the *Amazons*, or warrior-women, present us with an image of the Amerindians as exotic, wild and threatening. Yet such mythic themes already had a history within Europe, in advance of any contact with fifteenth century Native Americans; and so to the extent that these supposed ethnographic 'discoveries' in America were prefigured in the geographies and anthropologies of the Classical world and Mediaeval scholars they might be considered to bear little relation to the actual cultural practices of the Amerindians at all. It is the purpose of this talk not so much to examine this anticipation and prejudgment in European descriptions of America, as to try and outline the extent to which, unwittingly or not, such descriptions do actually incorporate genuinely informative data on native lifeways in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. To the extent that, in many instances, such European descriptions are our only source of data on this period in native history, it becomes all the more urgent that they are given an anthropologically sensitive treatment, rather than being dismissed out of hand as cultural fantasy - for even dreams must be composed from the elements of waking life.

Equally, it will be necessary to consider the purpose for the Europeans in describing Amerindian cultural praxis in these ways, for it is certain that the retelling of these myths in the American context did much to facilitate the conquest and colonization of the South American continent.

Such difficulties over the actual balance of empirical and ideological elements in the tales of *El Dorado*, *Cannibalism* and the *Amazons*, also go right to the heart of some of the debates in current anthropology. It is sometimes held that really nothing the Amerindians were doing in the fifteenth century provided a basis for such European beliefs - i.e.

there never were any cannibals, or Amazons, much less cities of gold - and so all that we may hope to study is our own cultural reactions to the American encounter, so heavily coloured by preconception were the descriptions of the conquistadores. Such a view is undoubtedly partly correct as we must certainly recognize inherent bias in the reports of the European colonizers but this is not the same as showing that no such cultural practices existed among the Amerindians, or more precisely no cultural practices to which such descriptions may ineptly allude. In short, whatever may be explicitly told to us in the early European description of America, there still remains, in virtue of the sustained interactions of European and Amerindian societies, an implicit ethnography within such texts that may be inferred from them by using our present access to a range of archaeological, historical and ethnographic materials. This in turn will also allow us to read these myths with a greater subtlety in their European context; a point which serves to emphasise the intercommunication, rather than the mutual unintelligibility, of Europeans and native Americans after 1492. Accordingly I will examine the possible anthropological bases of each myth in turn as well as suggesting how such tales may have had an ideological role to play in the development of the colonial process.

El Dorado

The legend or myth of El Dorado apparently refers to a diversity of Amerindian cultural practices that are related only in virtue of being grouped together under this general heading, and there is no reason to think that they were so-classed by the Amerindians themselves. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that, whatever the apparent absurdities of European accounts of El Dorado, an ancient tradition of goldworking in northern South America is amply attested to in both the archaeological and historical record (Bray 1972, Vega 1980). More specifically we might refer here to the evidence concerning both the production of native goldwork, with all the attendant metallurgical knowledge that this implies, as well as the evidence of the diverse symbolic and ritual uses to which such golden metals were put. Moreover, given the vast metallic wealth extracted by the Europeans from both Central and South America, it is not surprising that such a myth should have seemed most credible at the time. For, although the El Dorado myth was not prefigured in European minds in the specific way that cannibals and Amazons were, it is nonetheless the case that there existed a general expectation, partly deriving from the encounter

with Africa, that gold was especially engendered as a geo-physical property of the 'torrid zone', or equatorial latitudes.

What then is the legend of the Golden One? In essence the European El Dorado myth refers to the existence of a 'Golden One' - that is a 'king' or 'high chief' - who once a year was anointed by the sprinkling of gold dust onto his body. He was then paddled to the centre of a vast lake where he would deposit votive offerings of goldwork. A further subsidiary element in this tale concerns the names of this lake - variously given as *Paytiti*, *Parime*, or *Rupununi* - and the great and golden city which stood on its edge called *Manoa*. This city was held to lie in an upland area, perhaps recalling locations such as Tenotchticlan and Cuzco, and so it was that, in the high sierras of the upper Amazon, Colombia, Venezuela and Guayana, the El Dorado legend came successively to rest. As a consequence of this, and in trying to uncover the extent to which such reports may have also reflected actual Amerindian cultural practices, it is therefore important to remember that these variations in the European legends relate as much to the expansion of cultural and geographical knowledge in the sixteenth century, as they do to any inherent inconsistency and prejudice in European discourse about the Amerindians (Gil 1989, Perez 1973).

Thus it transpires that there were indeed plausible reasons for seeking the 'Golden One' in these three regions, that might be assessed independently from questions as to the rapacity and ignorance of the early expeditionaries. For example, in the case of Colombia where the native tradition of gold-working is well attested to from the archaeological record, a lake has been encountered and some past ritual behaviours investigated which indicate that the European myth of El Dorado may have accurately reflected elements of past cultural practices of the Muisca Amerindians, of this region (Perez 1972, Langebaek 1987). Thus, just outside of Bogotá lies Lake Guatavita - a deep freshwater lake that appears to have been formed by the impact crater of a meteor. Repeated dredging operations, beginning in the last century, have been carried out at this site and, indeed, golden votive objects (called *tunjos*) have been recovered from the lake bottom. Perhaps more significantly a *tunjo* that has been recovered from Lake Siecha, also in the Muisca region, is in a form which apparently depicts El Dorado himself, aboard his raft and surrounded by his retinue, being paddled to the centre of a lake; presumably to make the offering of *tunjos*. No city has been discovered on the shores of the lake, but the proto-urban scale of the culture of Muisca people, at

the heart of whose territories Lake Guatavita is situated, is strongly attested to by the historical record (Langebaek 1987, 1990). In this location then the El Dorado myth is actually partly confirmed by elements of Amerindian praxis but it is also significant that, in the sixteenth century, this only led to the belief that there would be yet more El Dorados to be encountered - especially as the Muisca store of gold-work was quickly plundered by the Spanish.

In this context the El Dorado tale can be seen to have also had an irreducibly mythic element, servicing the ideology of colonial expansion. This is shown by the evidence that this early encounter with the Muisca, and the other Colombian gold-working cultures, did not completely satisfy all the requirements of the El Dorado myth, and so only encouraged the search for another location. Accordingly Manoa, the supposed 'golden city' on the shores of a great lake, was transposed to the upper Amazon during the 1530-40's and latterly to the Guayana highlands, during the 1580-90's; this transposition closely matching the chronology of the expansion of European geographical understanding and colonial ambition.

As a result, we find that Gonzalo Pizarro, conquistador of Peru, wrote to the Spanish King in 1542 that, following assurances from the chief Amerindians as to the wealth of this region, he had led an expedition to *La Canela*, or the Land of Cinnamon, and the region around the lake of El Dorado, an area known today as the Rio Napo, in the upper Amazon (Medina 1934). Although Pizarro did not locate this source of native goldwork during his incursion, one of his captains, whom he sent to reconnoitre further downstream, Francisco de Orellana, found it impossible to return upriver to the main party and so became the first Spaniard to descend the full length of the Amazon river. It was following Orellana's encounters on the lower Amazon, which will be fully discussed later on, that the myth of the American Amazons originated - a conjuncture of historical circumstance which also illumines the interplay of myth and reality for the Europeans.

Despite Pizarro's failures in the Land of Cinnamon, the mythic apparatus of the Amazonian El Dorado continued to grow. The lake on which he resided was now said to be called *Paytiti* and various locations, subject to the annual flooding of the Amazon river, were investigated. Native goldwork was also persistently encountered but the identification of a single source repeatedly frustrated (Gil 1989).

This was undoubtedly partly due to the fact that the basic elements of the El Dorado myth had been uprooted and transported by the Europeans from their original Colombian context. Thus gold-sources in Amazonia and Guayana are rarely to be found in physical contexts analogous to those in Colombia but rather are alluvial and dispersed in character. However, the annual formation of 'lakes', due to the flooding of the Amazon river, as well as the cultural pattern of the working and wearing of gold as elite activities, meant that any one of the maximal chiefdoms of the Amazon basin could have provided an empirical context for European readings of the El Dorado legend.

The final, and still controversial location for El Dorado was in the uplands of Guayana. This location remains controversial because until last year no sample of Amerindian goldwork had been recovered from this area in modern times. Moreover recent cultural-ecological perspectives in anthropology have held this region to be generally poor or marginal to human settlement in South America with a corresponding scepticism as to the potential of this region for producing complex societies. Accordingly what traces there were of such complexity were thought (Meggers 1971) to derive from the Andean and/or Colombian regions.

Just as a proper anthropological understanding of this region has only now begun to emerge, so too this was the last place that El Dorado was pursued; this final pursuit beginning in the 1580-90's and only really ending in the eighteenth century as Europeans finally traversed the upland savannas. Moreover, as this was the geographical context for the final version of the El Dorado myth it has also often been taken to stand for all other versions, with the result that the failure to extract significant native goldwork from this region was thought to invalidate the El Dorado myth-cycle as a whole - notwithstanding the extensive plunder of gold in Colombia and the upper Amazon. This perhaps gives us a clue as to some of the ideological functions of the El Dorado myth for the Europeans, i.e. it acted as a constant stimulus to further conquest and occupation of the continent - just as was the case for Orellana's descent of the Amazon - in a way that abstract appeals for 'exploration' or 'discovery' could never have been. In turn such a ideological motif could become a constant stimulus to high political ambition, as much as for low greed, since the political significance of the power of 'Indian Gold' in Europe was explicitly alluded to in

contemporary debate. As Walter Raleigh wrote of Charles V, King of Spain, in his description of the *Empire of Guiana*;

It is his Indian Golde that endangers and disturbs all the nations of Europe, it purchases intelligence, creeps into Councils, and sets bound loyalty at liberty, in the greatest Monarchies of Europe. [1848:xiv]

But was there ever an El Dorado in the Guayana highlands? It seems that the answer to this question might now be yes (Whitehead 1990a). In 1990 a golden chestplate in the form of a double-headed eagle was dredged up from the bottom of the Mazaruni river in Guyana, which conforms most precisely with the sixteenth century reports of goldwork in this region, that had until now been doubted. So too, although it has for some time been appreciated that the annual flooding of the Essequibo and Branco rivers causes the formation of a great lake at the watershed of these rivers, called *Parime* or *Rupununi* by the Amerindians, it was not realised the extent to which this riverine interconnection provided an important focus for the trade of goldwork and semi-precious stones between the Orinoco and Amazon river systems. In this trade a people called *Manoas* played a crucial role, clearly offering an empirical context in which to understand allusions to El Dorado's city of Manoa. As in the upper Amazon context, no one king or chieftain seems to have dominated the production of goldwork, nor do votive offerings seem to have been made in the lake *Parime*, but perhaps this matters less than appears since the different versions and locations for the El Dorado myth-cycle became confused, and each new version became compounded on top of the last.

It may therefore be said that, while the European myth was unable to accurately reflect Amerindian praxis in the Guayana highlands, as it seems to have done in the Colombian context, its' application to this region nonetheless still implicitly acknowledges a native tradition of goldworking and the vitality of indigenous trade-systems well into the seventeenth century.

In sum then, we may say that there is a connection in the case of El Dorado between European myth and Amerindian praxis; but it is more complex than has been previously allowed. As the anthropological record continues to expand there will be further opportunity to detail this connection, but what is already clear is that we cannot dismiss, as

so many have done before, the implicit ethnography contained in European myth of El Dorado, treating it as no more than a complex invention of the wily natives, used as a ploy to rid themselves of the gold-fevered conquistadores.

The Amazones

She was called *Cuna Ataere* or *Conori*, the Great Queen of the Amazons, but unlike *El Dorado* whose golden empire was subject to successive relocation, the geographical referents for the tale of the Amazons were far more consistent. Thus, she was said to rule over seventy settlements in the Guayana highlands and, indeed, was there visited by one Irish adventurer who travelled to the headwaters of the Trombetas river for that very purpose (Lorimer 1989). A system of roads, guarded by her warriors, connected these villages. In her capital city stood five large temples, or *caranain*, dedicated to the worship of the sun, whose interiors were lined with painted wooden carvings and featherwork, as well as containing idols of gold and silver in the form of women (Medina 1934).

Most versions of this myth, deriving from the American context, were inspired by the account of Gaspar de Carvajal, a cleric who accompanied Orellana on his reluctant descent of the Amazon in 1542; but the myth was already prefigured in European minds by the tales of the *Amazoun*, or warrior-women. Such tales had come down from the Greeks, as in the *Geography* of Strabo (1917-33: Book 11), and had become somewhat popularised through various mediaeval texts such as Mandeville's Travels (1983).

In South America, the native name was sometimes given as *Aikeam-Benano*, or the 'women-without-men', and, while elements of the European myth are clearly transferred to the novel American context, new elements also emerge and old ones are suppressed, suggesting that in America the interplay between European preconception as to Amazon women and actual experience of the Amerindians developed in a distinct way. This in turn implies that the *Aikeam-Benano* were not simply a recapitulation or retelling of the *Amazoun* tale in the American context. Such a conjecture is also reinforced by a careful reading of Carvajal's original text, as well as other secondary materials such as the account in Thevet's description (1577-8) of southern Brazil. This suggests that the category 'Amazon' is used as a figurative device to make observation intelligible, rather than to advance the claim that the *Amazouns* of antiquity had been finally discovered in South America. Thus, the fifteenth century descriptions of Columbus and Chanca

rica. Thus, the fifteenth century descriptions of Columbus and Chanca (see Hulme & Whitehead 1992) concerning the secluded or 'captive' women on the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, as well as further such encounters in the territories of the Colombian Muisca and in Orinoco (see Whitehead 1990a), do suggest that the military element in the mediaeval European versions was not an invariant element of the encounter with Amerindian praxis. However, Thevet's later reports of women warriors in Brazil, as well as Carvajal's own observation of women war-captains driving on the male-warriors as they attacked the Spanish brigantines along the banks of the Amazon, clearly echo themes from the European versions.

Nonetheless, in Carvajal's eye-witness version this element somewhat diverges from the European myth-cycle since the women are seen to act as leaders, not common soldiers, and lacked the breast deformation that expressed their military status. Similarly, Carvajal's Amazons may have enjoyed less rapacious relationships with men, being content to use them just for reproductive purposes, and returning rather than killing their male offspring.

Even so, if the American Amazons were not military specialists they were certainly represented as politically dominant; as was indeed the case for some indigenous societies of the sixteenth century (Sued-Badillo 1979). In regard of the Amazons, Carvajal was told that many of the towns along the banks of the Amazon river were vassals to the Queen Conori and that the presence of her captains in the ranks of warriors was to exhort them to the defence of these boundary regions of her domain. One of Carvajal's informants also claimed to have been responsible for carrying the yearly tribute to the city of Conori herself - this tribute consisting of the feathers of macaws and parrots for the decoration of their temples, where libations of *chicha* were poured. Carvajal describes one of the altars where this was done as being;

... a hewn tree trunk ten feet in girth, there being represented and carved in relief a walled city with its enclosure and with a gate. At this gate were two towers, very tall and having windows, and each tower had a door, the two facing each other, and at each door were two columns, and this entire structure that I am telling about rested upon two very fierce lions, which turned their glances backwards as though suspicious of each other, holding between their forepaws and claws

the entire structure, in the middle of which there was a round open space ... through which they offered ... chicha for the Sun ... [Medina:205]

It would therefore seem that the American Amazons only conformed in part to European expectations, although it also seems undeniable that both European and Amerindian males shared anxieties about women that led to a convergence of interest in the possibility of an exclusive female society - at this level we appear to be dealing with a cultural universal in regard of gender relations. However, there are also some indications that women did indeed on occasion enjoy higher status in Amerindian socie-ties before the European conquest (Sued-Badillo 1979), such that it may be possible to reconstruct the empirical elements from which Amerindian mythic structures arose and to which the European versions allude.

For example, archaeological investigation at the mouth of the Amazon has revealed the existence of a proto-urban culture, Marajoara, in which women were central to the iconography of the elite, being credited with the shamanic power more usually associated with men (Roosevelt 1991). One might speculate that an apparent decline in the vitality of this culture, just prior to the encounter with the Europeans, may coincide with the 'retreat' of these women from the Amazon mouth to the Trombetas, possibly under pressure from the male orientated warrior and shamanic cults of the Tupinamba, who may have begun their occupation of the Amazon river in the thirteenth or early fourteenth century (Metrax 1948).

An economic basis for this female priority is suggested by the role these women had in protein provison via small fish capture (Roosevelt 1991) and in the manufacture of jade amulets, known as *takua*, often in the shape of frogs (Boomert 1987). Such amulets, as well as some other lithic items, were thought to be gifts of the *madre del agua* or mother-ofwaters. In turn these jade objects were exchanged for goldwork from the Orinoco basin and it was in upland Guayana that the markets servicing this trade were probably located - undoubtedly reinforcing the notion that El Dorado was also to be encountered here (Whitehead 1990a).

Such a conjunction of circumstance falls far short of demonstrating the existence of a society of Amazons, in the European reading of that

term, but it does suggest that more attention should be given to how womens' roles may have deteriorated under the conditions of colonial occupation. The existence of goldwork and jade-carvings obviously implies the activity of someone in making them and the mechanisms and social con-text of their exchange may be partly revealed to us in the myth-cycles of the Amazons and El Dorado. Accordingly, in our effort to perceive others through the fog of ethnocentricity we should not allow ourselves to be seduced into the further error of denying the possibility that others may construct a fundamentally different cultural praxis.

Nonetheless, whatever the nature of that cultural praxis, the European myth of the Amazons had a role to play in the ideology of colonial occupation by emphasising the exoticism, inversion and femininity of native America, thereby rendering it a fit object for domestication, conversion and invasion. However, in this role the Amazon myth had neither the endurance of the El Dorado legend, nor the direct, pragmatic political purpose of the discovery of cannibalism.

Cannibalism

Of the three myth-cycles we are examining that of cannibalism was undoubtedly the most thoroughly prefigured in European minds; though it is important to know that it was from the American encounter that the particular term *cannibal* derives. Until the first reports of Columbus's activities in the Caribbean had been received in Europe eaters of human flesh were known there, following the classical sources, as the *Anthropophagi*.

Thus it was Columbus's ethnographic judgement as to the nature of the Amerindian societies he found in the islands that meant the indigenous term *can'iba* or *cara'iba* came to be understood as 'eater-of-human-flesh'. In making this assessment Columbus put great emphasis on the information he was given by the *Taino* concerning non-Taino groups living to the south. He claimed they had told him that these groups of the Lesser Antilles were ferocious man-eaters and, perhaps more significantly, that the *Taino* would welcome his military assistance in ridding themselves of these tiresome neighbours. Columbus's eagerness to present the indigenous viewpoint on this question may well have been related to the fact that the eating of human flesh was at that time a legal pretext for military intervention and conquest - by presenting this information as originating among native peoples themselves Columbus possibly hoped to avoid the accusation that such

accounts were simply self-serving. Given the violent nature of the subsequent Spanish occupation of the region such a ploy seems to have been unsuccessful.

This interplay between political necessity and the discovery of cannibalism becomes even more evident after 1503, at which time the Spanish Crown formally declared such cannibals liable to enslavement, a general prohibition on Amerindian slavery having been declared some ten years previously. However, by 1518, so indiscriminate had the discovery of cannibals become that the Crown appointed a judge with plenary powers, Rodrigo de Figueroa, to make a classification of the peoples of the Caribbean islands, and neighbouring mainland to the south, with a view to prohibiting the enslavement of some of the many Amerindian groups who lived there. The political rather than ethnographic basis of this exercise is shown clearly enough in the way in which some populations, such as those of Trinidad and the Pearl Islands of Margarita, Cubagua and Coche, having been classified as 'carib' or 'canibal', were subsequently declassified if their enslavement and destruction was felt to be counter-productive. In the case of the Pearl Islands the need to preserve a source of labour for the pearl-beds was just such a consideration (Whitehead 1988).

Thus, in time, the ethnographic schema that Columbus had initiated with his distinction between the groups of the Greater Antilles and their cannibal neighbours to the south became generalised through the classification of Figueroa. Thereafter, as new peoples were encountered, the Spanish tended to assign them either into the category of *caribe*, that is cannibal and warlike, or *guatio*, that is non-cannibal and friendly. The term *guatio* was replaced by *aruaca* in the occupation of the mainland, after the Spanish had encountered the Lokono; an Amerindian group of the Orinoco river and Guayana coastlands who acted as the political counterpart on the continent to the Taino of the islands.

In the context of the politics of colonial occupation the discovery of cannibalism can thus be seen to have had a critical role in enabling the legal conquest and enslavement of unfriendly native groups. Indeed, it is now very evident that the issue of cannibalism has had a very similar role to play in many other colonial contexts world-wide and so it might be legitimately asked whether the many reports we have of cannibalistic activity have any basis in native practices at all. In

particular it has been noted that, despite all the reports and accusations of cannibalism that have been made, very few, if any, represent eye-witness accounts (Arens 1979). Certainly this is the case for Spanish colonial documentation which, by the mid-sixteenth century, almost ritually invokes the phrase *qui comen carne humana* every time discussion of unconquered native groups occurs, yet almost never alludes to anyone having actually seen such activity.

Similarly, in the Dutch, French and English documentation, although there are many references to cannibals there are precious few observers' accounts and, significantly in view of the utterly different legal basis for the colonial activity of these nations, altogether less pre-occupation with the issue. In which case one might well ask if there is any reason at all to think that Amerindian peoples ingested human flesh.

Bearing in mind all the political and ideological complexities of interpreting European accounts, there may yet be reasons to answer this question in the affirmative; but only on the basis of some critical qualifications as to the possible nature of cannibal activity. Most importantly, one must distinguish what is called *endo-cannibalism*, that is the consumption of ones' own deceased kin or family, from *exo-cannibalism*, that is the killing and eating of enemies or strangers.

The former behaviour has been well documented in this century, by eye-witness report, and basically involves the ingestion of a small amount of the powdered bone of a deceased relative (Chagnon 1983). This is certainly not the image of gluttonous depravity that the Spanish invoked in their accounts. Yet this kind of mortuary custom was undoubtedly fertile ground for the European imagination and it was precisely in regard of this custom that Columbus claimed to have made one of his first observations of cannibalism. He did this by interpreting the carefully preserved bones of ancestors, that were often displayed in Amerindian longhouses in the Lesser Antilles, as being nothing more than the detritus of a cannibal feast.

Alleged cases of *exo-cannibalism* are much rarer although eye-witness reports from the Dutch and French certainly exist (Whitehead 1988). However, it is important to note that they do not refer to some gastronomic motive, some perverse preference for human flesh above that of more normal foods, but to a phase in ritual behaviour designed either

to invoke a spirit for revenge, or to allow the warrior, who has just killed an enemy, to rejoin the normality of daily life. In this context the ingestion of a small amount of human flesh may be understood as a rite of passage from the dangerous spiritual state of warrior/killer to the safe spiritual state of husband/clansman (Whitehead 1990b).

Such a schema seems to be reflected in recent and contemporary Amer-indian beliefs as to the role of the Jaguar or Tiger-Spirit in the lives of men. In former times it is said that a dance was performed by the warriors specifically to invoke the Tiger-Spirit, called *kaikusi-yumu*, who would come to live in the hearts of the warriors so that they would be fierce. However, in order to purge oneself of this aggressive and brutal spirit after battle, *kaikusi-yumu* must be allowed to taste human blood and flesh for, as the Caribs say; "*When the tiger is in the man, the man becomes a tiger*". It is in the context of these spiritual and psychological necessities that exo-cannibalistic behaviours may have their origin.

Even today elements of this ancient ritual complex are still found being practiced by the *kanaima* assassins in the Guianas. This cult, like the Leopard Men of Africa, practices individual assassination. The assassin, like the warriors of old, must invoke the Tiger-Spirit to achieve his purpose and so too, having performed the murder according to the ritual prescriptions, must rid himself of this dangerous force. This may only be done by sucking the putrid juices of his victims corpse, which are said to taste 'like honey' - failure to so do leads only to madness.

However, such behaviours are very different to the orgiastic consumption of raw human flesh that Spanish accounts so often allude to, nor can these practices be equated with the ritualised butchery of the Brazilian Tupinamba that we see depicted in the woodcuts published by Theodor De Bry at the turn of the sixteenth century (1590-1634: Book 8). In short there seems to be little evidence for the cannibalism that was invented by the politics of colonialism, but some indications that the bodies of kin and others might be a source of spiritual power if directly absorbed through physical ingestion.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasised, that this much is true for many other cultures, so that there is certainly nothing specifically Amer-indian about such behaviour. In which case we may well feel that the

European obsession with the eating of others had much less to do with depicting Amerindian cultures, than it did with responding to deeper European anxieties about such a profane behaviour - for it should not be forgotten that Christianity provided a key image of sacred cannibalism, the consumption of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

What then is to be concluded ? In an obvious sense no final conclusion is possible for our knowledge of the past may be expected to increase and our understanding of the American encounter in that past will also change. So too the questions we ask of the past will not remain constant. At the least we can see that in past times, as in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau or Lafitau, there have been many interrogations of Amerindian behaviour in order to try and discern a state of nature, or the foundations of liberty, or the destiny of racial groups. Today we are more often concerned with how our own image is reflected in that encounter, which is certainly something that it is most necessary to know, but such self absorption may also develop negatively and express an indifference to the Amerindian side of that encounter. Thus, just as the wild Amerindians of the sixteenth century were held to be outside the boundaries of civil or rational society, so today an excessive fetishism of the cultural separateness of Amerindian people can also imply exclusion: only now they are banished to a pre-textual limbo, lying beyond the limits of post-modern discourse.

Alternatively, the role of the current anthropologist might be to attempt to discern the 'implicit ethnography' of past European accounts and distinguish it from those ideological devices which permitted the Europeans to make the New World into a variant version of the Old. As part of this process of past and present interpretation it may be that universal elements in human beliefs will emerge. For, although we have seen that European accounts of America were strongly prefigured by ideas that had existed since Classical times, there yet remains a residual element in European description that can only be taken to refer to some new reality that was encountered. In other cases, however, there appears to have been a convergence between Amerindian and European beliefs which certainly confuses the process of interpretation but does not invalidate it. The myths of the Amazons and Cannibals seem to be good examples of this, since Amerindian cosmologies are no less concerned with such issues as the

proper status of women or the profanity of eating human flesh, than are European ones. It can hardly then be a surprise if, just as did the first Europeans in America, we perceive only ourselves in others.

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