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Review: Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society

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Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society.
By Beth A. Conklin. University of Texas Press, 2001. 285 pages. \$22.95

In *Consuming Grief* Beth A. Conklin has responded to the complex and difficult question of cannibalism with a complex and often difficult book. The complexity arises from Conklin's impressive research into the Wari' community, which practiced mortuary cannibalism as recently as the 1950s, interlaced with her examination of the stereotyping of so-called primitive cultures and the insights that modern theories might have for the study of alien cultures and practices. The difficulty most often arises from her unwaveringly direct approach to cannibalism itself: she reconstructs Wari' funerary practices in exceptional detail, drawing the reader into Wari' views and experiences within their own cognitive framework. Compellingly written, her book challenges most understandings of the limits of humane behavior; at the same time I must add that the passages on the preparation and consumption of the corpses are, frankly, not for the squeamish.

As an anthropologist Conklin has undertaken here a nuanced and empathetic portrait encompassing a number of intersecting dimensions of Wari' culture. Notably, she reconstructs, after over two years of interviews in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the now-defunct Wari' funeral rituals within their understandings of sickness, death, and community, interwoven with the challenges that Wari' villagers have faced during their forced relocation and concomitant abandonment of many traditional customs. While the "thick description" solidly grounds her analysis of the significance of cannibalism for Wari' participants, her study may nonetheless leave historians of religion with questions on the spiritual dimensions of funerary practices, the roles of shamans, and the cosmological structures through which human and animal spirits interact. This may, in fact, attest to the power of the text: it leaves the reader wanting to know more.

In the introduction Conklin explains her terminology and purposes in this study, contextualizing it within the indigenous South American cultural milieu. Although the Wari' ate the corpses of non-Wari' enemies, the author considers only the funerary practices of endocannibalism, the eating of other Wari' after their deaths. Conklin insists that their "compassionate cannibalism" was not a bizarre or vicious practice but, rather, "a cultural response to the loss" (xvii) of a loved one; the Wari' ate their dead out of "respect and compassion for the dead person" (xvii) and their close families. Conklin comments that she began "by taking seriously what Wari' say about cannibalism's relation to [subjective] experiences of bereavement. I treat the eating of the dead and the acts that surrounded it as pragmatic activities through which Wari' constructed and conveyed values, images and relationships that individuals could draw on in death with the death of someone close to them" (xxiii). The Wari' were, in fact, among the few South American communities that institutionalized cannibalism, and their practices—so unlike the patterns typically derived from Melanesian examples—resist facile classification or interpretation using contemporary psychological and social theories.

Conklin's study follows, in four sections. In part 1, "Contexts," Conklin addresses the primary problems of studies of cannibalism: first, the revulsion the practice may evoke in the researcher and, second, the persistent denial of its existence at all. Evidence from eyewitnesses and recent researchers leaves little room for doubt that Wari' funerals included consumption of the corpse. Wari' accounts of the significance of funerary cannibalism relied on mythological precedents and mirrored explanations of intervillage festivals and the spirit's journey in the

afterlife. In Wari' relations with other Wari', related animal spirits, and their own ancestors, Wari' alternated roles of death and rebirth, isolation and incorporation, and eating and being eaten; to maintain proper relations across social categories, they "killed and consumed others symbolically... in an idiom of voluntary mutual predation" (45).

Although relations within and across social groups seem to have been egalitarian, several puzzles remain in this assessment of Wari' society and ritual, mostly concerning gender roles. Past practices of polygyny and bride service suggest that women's and men's roles might have been unequal or at least differently understood. Men were the chief participants in the ritualized festivals that echoed the relations with the dead and otherworld spirits, and, in the funerals themselves, women were not expected to eat the corpse. Women were not hunters, did not enter into the balance of prey and predator to the same extent as men, and did not contribute their own body fluids or substance to the maturation of adult men. While unresolved in this text, these puzzles hint at the complexity of the subjective experiences of Wari' in the past and indicate that not all perspectives on the more public performances of predatory exchanges may, in fact, be recoverable by a contemporary researcher.

Part 2, "Motifs and Motives," presents Conklin's argument that Wari' structures of cutting, roasting, eating, and transformation in rituals were intertwined with Wari' views on the self in society. Illness and loss of consciousness brought a sudden and dramatic response from Wari', whose mourning shattered the community and whose funeral rituals built it anew. Close family members responded to death with torrents of grief and regret and might only have been able to let go of the deceased and their memories through the rituals of dismemberment, roasting, and eating of the corpse by their more distant kin. From all perspectives cannibalism was the honor due the dead: it was demanded by close family, and by the deceased as well, to eradicate the very identity of the dead and enable the spiritual transformation into an ancestral spirit in parallel underworld rituals. Conklin argues convincingly that western theories shed little light on the Wari' institution of mortuary cannibalism, for Wari' did not-as scholars have argued about other such cases-lack protein or express either overt or covert aggression toward the dead during or through the ritual process. And while the dismemberment and reconstruction of the dead are probably best understood as the metaphor for the transformation of the self from one essential state to another, it may also be true that the more distant kin who were compelled to eat were similarly transformed through the incorporation of the substance from the dead.

In part 3, "Bodily Connections," Wari' understandings of the self emerge as primarily embodied: for them, the body-not the soul or spirit-is the "site where personal identity and social relationships develop" (132) and the locus of substance exchanges and social obligations. Here their ideas about human spiritual reality "highlight the ways in which alienation and egocentric desires separate individuals from one another" (134). Personal and social nurturance support bodily health as well as individual emotional and intellectual properties, whereas the spirit, only loosely associated with the body and lacking a distinctive identity after death, is "the vehicle of consciousness" (134). Finally, because of the shared bodily substances developed through relationship, because their shared blood was too strong and its ingestion might prove fatal, Wari' abstained from eating their close kin in past funerals.

Part 4, "Eat and Be Eaten," completes Conklin's argument that the purpose of mortuary cannibalism cannot be understood outside of the interwoven web of Wari' identity and relationships. In death as in life, Wari' were predators and prey and entered into reciprocal relationships with certain prey animals, the spirits in the underworld who controlled them, and-most importantly-their own ancestral spirits. Funeral practices, then, intersected with their

notions of mutual predation so that as the Wari' corpse was dismembered and eaten by kin, the "spirit-body" was "killed" and transformed in the underworld into a perfected and reincarnating spirit. The ancestral spirit, finally alienated from its social body and social role, became manifest in Wari' life again—not in memories but, rather, as the white-lipped peccary who was the favored prey of Wari' society. Several myths, recounting the origin of fire and other humanizing features of Wari' culture, underscore the reciprocity demanded of them as hunters: they were at once predators and prey, and if they were to eat cooked food, they must be roasted and eaten themselves. This, then, is the ultimate explanation for Wari' cannibalism: it turned "potential aggression into mutually beneficial, life-sustaining exchanges" (203) across species and life barriers.

Conklin's explanation of "compassionate cannibalism" is an extraordinary account of the social and personal significance of the extraordinary practice of eating the dead. Questions that the reader might bring—on how and why cannibalism flourished as a positive cultural force among Wari' in the past—are answered through (and sometimes overwhelmed by) Conklin's careful exposition of Wari' perspectives on ontology and society, the human role in reciprocal life-sustaining relationships, and the use of rituals to establish and eradicate our existence. Her insights into Wari' life find consistent support through her extensive research results, but her sparkling prose is at its best in the few personal anecdotes revealing the nature of her own relationships with the few Wari' who have survived the one-sided predation of sprawling capitalism.

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