Looking for Truth: Dissecting Tales of Fijian Cannibals

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Introduction

After Europeans encountered Fiji in the eighteenth century, the islands quickly gained fame for having cannibal tribes. Captain James Cook, an early explorer of the Pacific islands, describes the Fijian natives as an “addicted people, eating their enemies, whom they kill in the battle” (Banivanua-Mar 26). The people had a culture of war rituals, rivalry, and conflict between tribes that inspired cannibalistic rumors. Those that visited Fiji spread wild tales that the westerners eagerly devoured. Under analysis, these stories lack compelling evidence to claim the Europeans and Americans met Fijian cannibals and instead tell more about the society the tales come from.

Account 1. William Endicott: American Sailor, 1829

Years after Endicott and his fellow traders were shipwrecked on Fiji, Endicott reported that he attended a feast where he witnessed triumphant Fijian warriors preparing and baking two people. One enthusiastic native allegedly began to eat a victim’s brain, but it was quickly confiscated. Endicott left the party before feasting began but claimed that the next day he was invited to eat a cooked foot which was missing its ankle and toes (Endicott 41-51).

Endicott’s first-hand account is initially compelling but lacks substantial evidence to be fully trusted. Endicott watched the tribe’s war ritual expecting to see cannibalism which tainted his view of the event. He was not present during the feast. The natives stopped the only human consumption he actually saw, suggesting that cannibalism was unacceptable. The foot Endicott received was so mutilated that we cannot be sure if it was just a similar shaped piece of meat which he believed was a foot because he expected to see some human body part.

Account 2. John Hunt: British Missionary, 1838-1848

Hunt taught Christianity to the Fijians for ten years, conversing with them directly in their own language. His letters home recount that he witnessed cruelty and heard threats of cannibalism from the natives. He even smelled them cooking human flesh (Rowe 120). He reports that his Christian converts ceased practicing cannibalism.

Hunt’s story of the cannibals in Fiji is grounded on his prior assumptions rather than his firsthand experience on the islands. Although he witnessed violence and brutality among the native people, his conclusion that the Fijians were also cannibals is still unsupported. He likely understood the Fijian language enough to know that they spoke of cannibalism, but he never wrote that he witnessed someone eating another human.

Account 3. John E. Erskine: British Explorer, 1863

In his book, Erskine recounts a personal conversation he had with a Fijian Chief named Thakombau during which Erskine denounced cannibalism; this chief confirmed that his ancestors had been cannibals, but he and his people were eating humans less often. Erskine attended a banquet with the Fijians in which they showed him their human cooking ovens and the scraps of human flesh still hanging from trees. When directly confronted, the natives denied that they practiced cannibalism and changed the subject. (Erskine 256).

Erskine’s conversation with the chief seems to confirm cannibalism but perhaps the chief did not want to offend his guest by directly contradicting him. Or, the chief may have been so familiar with the westerners’ belief in Fijian cannibalism that he had come to believe that it was true—at least for his ancestors whom he may have never met. Erskine assumed that the Fijians were lying about not eating humans even though he could not understand their language without an interpreter. Finally, perhaps the ovens Erskine saw were for cremation only, and the flesh of other animals or human sacrifices (not for consumption) hung from the trees.

Conclusion

The lack of convincing sources and evidence make it impossible to confirm that Europeans and Americans met Fijians who were truly cannibals. The many people that believe cannibalism was practiced in Fiji shows that the general public and even some scholars trust “firsthand accounts” and exciting rumors without looking critically at the questionable aspects of the various (and conflicting) reports. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, imperialist nations used these stories to fuel the idea that the Fiji people were inferior and justify their presence in that part of the world. They decided that the natives couldn’t manage themselves without western oversight and religion. These stories of cannibalism do give a glimpse into human nature: that we tend to see in others what we expect to see and that usually, we assume that what is different from us is amoral and inferior.