

cannibalism

also called anthropophagy

also called anthropophagy eating of human flesh by humans. The term is derived from the Spanish name (Caríbales, or Caníbales) for the Carib, a West Indies tribe well known for its practice of cannibalism. A widespread custom going back into early human history, cannibalism has been found among peoples on most continents.

Though many early accounts of cannibalism probably were exaggerated or in error, the practice prevailed until modern times in parts of West and Central Africa, Melanesia (especially Fiji), New Guinea, Australia, among the Maoris of New Zealand, in some of the islands of Polynesia, among tribes of Sumatra, and in various tribes of North and South America.

In some regions human flesh was looked upon as a form of food, sometimes equated with animal food, as is indicated in the Melanesian pidgin term long pig. Victorious Maoris often cut up the bodies of the dead after a battle and feasted on the flesh, and the Batak of Sumatra were reported to have sold human flesh in the markets before they came under full control by the Dutch.

In other cases the consumption of particular portions or organs was a ritual means by which certain qualities of the person eaten might be obtained or by which powers of witchcraft or sorcery might be employed. Ritual murder and cannibalism in Africa were often related to sorcery. Headhunters and others often consumed bits of the bodies or heads of deceased enemies as a means of absorbing their vitality or other qualities and reducing their powers of revenge (see also headhunting). The Aztecs apparently practiced cannibalism on a large scale as part of the ritual religious sacrifice of war captives and other victims.

In some cases, the body of a dead person was ritually eaten by his relatives, a form called endocannibalism. Some Aboriginal Australians performed such practices as acts of respect. In other cases, ritual cannibalism occurred as a part of the drama of secret societies.

There is no one satisfactory and all-inclusive explanation for cannibalism. Different peoples have practiced it for different reasons, and a group may practice cannibalism in one context and view it with horror in another. In any case, the spread of modernization usually results in the prohibition of such practices. In modern society cannibalism does occasionally occur as the result of extreme physical necessity in isolated surroundings.

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Cite

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"cannibalism." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 4 Jun. 2021. academic-eb-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/levels/collegiate/article/cannibalism/20006. Accessed 29 Oct. 2021.

