

SACRAMENTAL CANNIBALISM.

BY THE EDITOR.

MR. James B. Smiley's article on "The Communion Ceremony" contains a great number of references to ideas prevalent among savages, which anticipate the underlying principle of sacramental eating and drinking. Cannibalism was originally by no means due to the physical command of hunger or the appetite for human flesh. Instances of that kind are rare exceptions and occur only when a terrible famine has reduced the population of a besieged city or a poverty-stricken district to a state of despair bordering on insanity. But cannibalism from religious motives is a feature quite common among all the tribes of man at a certain stage of civilization including even the ancestors of the European nations. Prof. W. M. Flinders Petrie touches as follows on the subject when speaking of prehistoric Egypt:

"Prejudice is strange. I suppose the average British house-keeper would rather travel in the same carriage with a gambler, or a rake, than with a cannibal; the former two she might call 'gentlemanly,' but her skirts would be gathered closer around her when she brushed past the latter. It is not by any means only the horror of presupposed murder; but, without that being in question, it is the use of human flesh as food which to modern respectability seems ghastly. There is no code of Mrs. Grundy about it, because it is outside of the very limited experiences of that worthy lady. No, it is sheer mental prejudice against strangeness, which puts even the innocent and affectionate cannibal below the moral offender. Yet a large part of mankind are cannibals, and still more—perhaps all—have been so, including our own forefathers, for Jerome describes the Atticotti, a British tribe, as preferring human flesh to that of cattle."

"When, a short time ago, it came to light that a civilized people, at about 3000 B. C., who had exquisite handicrafts, whose children played with choicely wrought toys, while their fathers carried on a wide-spread trade in the Mediterranean—when it appeared that these people habitually cut the heads from their dead and ate some portion of the bodies, no one would credit the notion. Every sort of explanation was started; but the facts could not be gainsaid, and the broken marrow-bones and piles of ribs and vertebrae told plainly how the Libyan invaders of Egypt had honored their beloved dead.

"And now this year it is found that one of the grandest and most capable people that ever lived—those who built the splendid masonry of the Pyramids, at once the greatest and most highly finished works of man; who carved some of the most lifelike statues, who organized society and labor on a great scale, who treasured a delicate moral feeling—that many of these people reverently buried the bones of their dead after elaborately removing all the flesh. Why they did so we can hardly doubt when we look at the ways of other races.

"When we classify the motives of cannibalism that are recorded, we find that in more than half the races mental motives prevail, and in rather less than half the physical motives of hunger or pleasure. We may roughly classify the motives thus:

	PER CENT.
Honor, kindness, future good, love	20
To obtain strength or magic results	19
As a ceremony, or to acquire position	10
As a punishment	5
	54
From hunger or need of food	18
From preference as food	28
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The higher motives of honor and kindness prevail mostly in Asia, Australia, and South America, but seem to be unknown in Polynesia, North America, and Africa. The Thibetans considered it a glorious burial for their honored elders to be eaten; some Australians also eat the dead with the greatest and most solemn honor; and the Tupi and Capanahuas in South America did likewise. Besides this, it is often a matter of kindness and love for the dead. The Cucumas of South America said that 'it was better to be inside a friend than to be swallowed up by the cold earth.' And who will say that they are wrong? Such seems to have been the main sentiment in that quarter of the world, as it appears again among the Botocudos, Tapuyas, Mayoruna, Mundrucu, and Guyanis. The idea of protecting the dead from decay and putrefaction, which would befall them in the ground, and giving them a kindly and affectionate disposal among their friends and kin, is as far removed as possible from any brutality and baseness.....

"Other motives, for the benefit of the living, are also usual. The idea that eating of the heart of a lion will make a man brave, or the legs of a deer will make him swift, is a common one in many parts of the world.....

"The great moral objection to cannibalism is, no doubt, that it may lead to murder; and this is the special blot on African cannibalism."

The data of Professor Petrie are based on good anthropological evidence, and Mr. Smiley contributes a number of additional facts which go to prove the universality of cannibalism. We may mention still another motive, which is the idea of incorporating the soul of the deceased, and it is probable that at a certain stage of civilization the heir had to incorporate the soul of the testator by partaking of his body. In this way he was deemed the rightful successor in whom the soul of the departed one had taken abode.

We look with horror upon the superstitions of the savage, but if we were living under the same conditions and held the same opinions as to the nature of the world, and especially of the soul, we would act in the same way. Primitive man is not so stupid as he appears to us. He has a logic of his own which he follows with rigorous persistency. The witch trials and heresy persecutions of the Middle Ages belong to the same category and call for the same explanation. The inquisitors and judges of witches were neither malevolent nor criminal. They simply drew conclusions according to the arguments at their disposal, and when we know all we shall have to understand the situation and judge the superstitions of our ancestors not only with leniency but with condonement.

Why then has cannibalism become so offensive to modern mankind? Professor Petrie ridicules the sentiment, and yet who of us does not find the idea shocking and ghastly?

In order to understand the horror that attaches to the very idea of eating human flesh, we must bear in mind, that man shrinks from eating certain animals, and these animals are always those which have been sacred to some god or other and were first partaken of sacramentally at the feast of the deity. Semitic archeologists have discovered that the boar was originally the animal sacred to the sun-god and was venerated in Syria as the symbol of Adonis. This conception was not limited to Semites, for even the ancient Teutons cherished the same idea with regard to Fro, the sun-god who was said to ride on a boar with golden bristles. *Fro* means "the lord," as does Adonis, and the word is still retained in the German name for the Procession of the Host, called the "body of the Lord," or in German *Fronleichnam*. The feminine of *Fro* is *Frau* which applies in the same sense to the Virgin Mary as the queen of heaven, just as its older form Frigga or Freya applied to the mother goddess and queen of heaven of the Teutons.

The German heroes in Walhalla were believed to feast sacramentally on a boar whose flesh never gave out, and we cannot doubt that in Syria the pig was a sacred animal solemnly partaken of by the worshipers on the festive day of Adonis. When in a later stage of civilization the ritual of Adonis made way for a higher religion, the sacramental animal became an object of abomination, and thenceforth the boar and all its kin were scorned by the adherents of the new faith.

The same process took place among the Saxons who in their pagan days worshiped Wodan as the god of heaven, to whom the horse was sacred. We know that they celebrated sacramental feasts

at which they partook freely of the flesh of the horse, but when Christianity superseded the worship of Wodan and the other gods of the Saxons, the communion of the pagan ritual was forbidden by severe penalties, and this rule applied even to eating the flesh of the horse, the animal sacred to Wodan. This habit is so deeply ingrained into all Teutonic races that at the present time they instinctively revolt from equine food.

Now we will understand that the reason for abstaining from human flesh is not merely anthropological, it is also religious. There was a time in the development of all races when human sacrifices were deemed indispensable and no race on earth can be considered free from this taint if we may regard it so. We must look upon this fact of history as an indication of man's deeply seated religious notions, and of the fact that he has always been willing to offer to God the best and dearest in his possession. If we consider the natural reversion that sets in when in a higher phase of his development, man shrinks from partaking of the sacramental food of a previous age, we will understand the deep aversion modern man has acquired against cannibalism.

It is one of the great blessings of Christianity that being rooted in the remotest past of mankind it abolished ancient superstitions by fulfilling them. The Christian sacrament* contains reminiscences of the old cannibalistic custom and yet it has done away with it forever. The Christian worshiper still feels the yearning to partake of the deity and this is realized in a sense-perceptible rite. The old notion looms up in the background, yet it is transfigured by a spiritual meaning.

* For further information see the author's article, "The Food of Life and the Sacrament," *Monist* X, 247 ff. and 343 ff.