

CANNIBALISM AS A FEUDING RITUAL IN EARLY
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ABSTRACT

Upon encountering cannibalism among New World natives, some European observers concluded that those South American Indian tribes who practiced it (mainly Brazilian) were savages. Montaigne was an exception. To the contrary, in his Essays, Montaigne is satisfied to compare the cultural practices of various human groups, without ranking them in a cultural hierarchy.

Keywords: Montaigne, cannibalism, relativism, feud, vendetta, South American Indians.

CANNIBALISMO COME UN RITUALE DI FAIDA NELL'
EUROPA MODERNA

SINTESI

Avendo incontrato il cannibalismo presso le popolazioni indigene del Nuovo Mondo, alcuni osservatori europei erano giunti alla conclusione che le tribù sudamericane (principalmente quelle brasiliane) che lo praticavano fossero composte di selvaggi. Montaigne fu in questo un'eccezione, e nei suoi Saggi si limitò a paragonare le usanze culturali di diversi gruppi umani, senza classificarli in base a una gerarchia culturale.

Parole chiave: Montaigne, cannibalismo, relativismo, faida, vendetta, Indiani dell'America del Sud

By the late sixteenth century, when Michel de Montaigne was writing his *Essays*, there was a large body of texts about the New World – many of which described in various ways what they viewed as the cannibalism of many of the natives there. As is well known, Montaigne drew primarily on two French authors in developing his account of the Tupi Indians. He makes an oblique reference to these texts at the start of his essay. “*I long had a man in my house that lived ten or twelve years in the New World, discovered in these latter days, and in that part of it where Villegagnon landed,*” Montaigne writes, claiming to have learned about the cultures of Brazil directly from a man who had travelled there, even adding that he had also met “*several seamen and merchants who at the same time went on the same voyage*” (Montaigne, 1958, 152). But this was a literary conceit. While we can’t exclude the possibility that Montaigne met a fellow Frenchman who had traveled to Brazil, we know that his account of the Tupi of Brazil was based primarily on his reading. There were two French accounts available to him: one, *Les singularitéz de la France Antarctique* (1577), by the Catholic missionary and royal cosmographer André Thevet, the other, *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre de Brésil* (1578) by the French Huguenot Jean de Léry.

The Franciscan Thevet had sailed with Admiral Villegagnon from France for Brazil in 1555. He spent slightly over a year there, as chaplain to the fledgling French colony at Fort Coligny, situated in Guanabara Bay, before coming back to France in early 1557, where later that same year he published his famous account of his experiences in the New World (Thevet, 1558). Then, in March 1557, only a few months after Thevet’s departure, Jean de Léry arrived in Brazil as part of the first Protestant mission to the Americas. Just twenty-three at the time, de Léry was as eager for adventure as for helping to establish the Reformed Faith abroad. In November 1556 he had embarked from the port city of Honfleur on the *Grande Roberge*, one of three warships Henri II had financed in order to bolster the fledgling colony in Guanabara Bay. Upon his arrival, de Léry found the conditions in the colony quite primitive: there was only one timber structure and a few scattered grass-roofed huts (De Léry, 2006). King Henri had supported the colony with the goal of countering Portugal’s dominance of trade with Brazil, but, with the encouragement of Admiral de Coligny, a Calvinist sympathizer, he had viewed the settlement also as a possible refuge for French Protestants.

Even though Protestants were at first welcomed on the island, the majority of the colonists were Catholics. And, for reasons that remain unclear, Villegagnon, though he had at first welcomed de Léry and his fellow Huguenots – suddenly turned against the Protestants. Ostensibly Villegagnon became enraged after Pierre Richier, a Calvinist of repute in the colony, celebrated the Last Supper, Villegagnon denounced the Calvinists for their rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation. But his theological argument was likely a pretext. He must have come to believe that he would find greater support if he backed the Catholics; and in the end his goals must have been pragmatic, based above all on his desire to ensure a certain unity or religious consensus among the settlers. Certainly he did much to make the lives of the Calvinist settlers miserable. In October several of them, including de Léry, fled to the mainland for safety, living for several months among the Tupi. It was on the basis of this experience that de Léry would offer his rich account of

their customs in his *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre de Brésil*, though it is important to recall that this work was not published until more than twenty years later.

While cannibalism plays a salient role in both Thevet's and de Léry's account, it is not their central concern. Indeed, one of the impressive aspects of the works is that both Thevet and de Léry offer what we might describe as a social explanation of cannibalistic practices – an explanation that Montaigne himself will largely adopt in his essay on this theme.

Essentially both Thevet and de Léry present cannibalism as the ritual core of the vendetta or the feud – Thevet actually specifically calls the conflict a feud or a vendetta, underlying in his Chapter XLI the thirst of the “savage” Tupinamba for “vengeance”. But it is a passage from de Léry that is most compelling. “*These barbarians do not wage war,*” he writes:

to win countries and lands from each other, for each has more than he needs; even less do the conquerors aim to get rich from the spoils, ransoms, and arms of the vanquished: that is not what drives them. For, as they themselves confess, they are impelled by no other passion than that of avenging, each for his side, his own kinsmen and friends who in the past have been seized and eaten, in the manner that I will describe in the next chapter; and they pursue each other so relentlessly that whoever falls into the hands of his enemy must expect to be treated, without any compromise, in the same manner: that is, to be slain and eaten. Furthermore, from the time that war has been declared among any of these nations, everyone claims that since an enemy who has received an injury will resent it forever; one would be remiss to let him escape when he at one's mercy: their hatred is so inveterate that they can never be reconciled. On this point one can say that Machiavelli and his disciples (with whom France, to her great misfortune, is now filled) are true imitators of barbarian cruelties; for since these atheists teach and practice against Christian doctrine, that new service must never cause old injuries to be forgotten – that is, that men, participating in the devil's nature, must not pardon each other--do they not show their hearts to be more cruel and cunning than those of tigers (De Léry, 2006, 112).

The particular feud that Thevet and de Léry described was one that had long pitted the Tupinamba and the Tupinikin – two of the major tribes of the Tupi-Guarani peoples – against one another. At times the relationship between these two groups must have been relatively peaceful, but the arrival of the Portuguese and the French along the coast of Brazil in the sixteenth century and the rivalry of these two European powers to gain greater and greater control over the resources of this territory intensified the hostility between these two groups. The Portuguese allied themselves with the Tupinikin, the French with the Tupinamba. And it was the warfare between these two groups that both Thevet and de Léry witnessed during his exile from Fort Coligny.

And it was in the context of these disputes/feuds that cannibalism took place. The goal of the conflict was not so much to kill as many of one's enemy as possible as to take a significant number of them captive. And it was these captives who would become ritually sacrificed and eaten by the victors. Thevet and De Léry each devote several pages to

describing the various stages of ritual. The prisoners are treated surprisingly well; they are given wives; they are fed well; and, only once they are fattened, are they executed in a ceremony in which both they and their captors declare their valor. But it is by no means clear that Thevet and de Léry viewed this behavior as essentially worse than the behaviors he had witnessed in France during the sixteenth century. This was a period in which, largely because of the breakdown of public order during the Wars of Religion, traditional feuds intensified. Moreover, at the siege of Sancerre in 1573 de Léry himself had been witness to the practice of survivor cannibalism. And even within feuds in Europe the violence could be extreme and lead if not to cannibalism to the ritual dismemberment of the victim's body and, in some cases, the feeding of parts of the body to animals – a practice to which indeed Montaigne himself appears to allude in his essay (Muir, 1993, xxiii).

Moreover, it is also important to point out that Thevet and de Léry's accounts were not the first detailed accounts that we have of cannibalism in the New World. We also find important discussions among the Portuguese missionaries. In his **Dialogo sobre a conversao de gentio** of 1549, for example, the Portuguese Jesuit Manoel de Nobrega had written:

When they capture someone, they take him to a great feast, with a rope tied about his neck, and give him, for a wife, the daughter of the chief, or whomsoever else he is most contented with and begin to raise him as they would a pig, until the time for killing him arrives. For this occasion everyone from the surrounding district comes together, for a feast, and, one day before they kill him, they wash him all over, and the following day they carry him away, and put him in a public place, tied by a cord through the belt, and there comes one of them who is very well ornamented and (who) goes through the habits of his ancestors, and, finishing, he who is about to die answers him, saying that he is courageous and not afraid of death, and that he has also killed many of his own, and that he will be revenged by his family, and other things of a similar nature. And when he is dead they cut off his thumb, because it is with this that he looses his arrows, and the other (fingers) that fasten to sticks, in order to eat them when they are cooked and roasted (Whitehead, 2008, xxvi).

And other Portuguese texts – by such writers as José de Anchieta and Gabriel Soares de Sousa – had also given emphasis to the practice of cannibalism as a ritual element with a structure of violence that is recognizable to European readers as a feud. “*They eat not to feed themselves,*” de Sousa writes, “*but for vengeance*” (Whitehead, 2008, xxx). And Montaigne will pick up on this idea as well. Like Thevet and de Léry, he places the act of cannibalism within the broader context of the feud. And he understands cannibalism as an act of vengeance. He even writes, “*they do not do this, as some think, for nourishment, as the Scythians anciently did, but as a representation of an extreme revenge*” – in a formulation that evokes both de Léry the Portuguese de Sousa.

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In an interesting essay on Montaigne, Carlo Ginzburg has argued that “*ethnography emerged when the curiosity and methods of the antiquarians was transferred from the study*

of people who had lived long before, such as the Greeks and Romans, to those who lived far away, such as the peoples of the New World" (Ginzburg, 2006, 76; Ginzburg, 2000, 101–103). But in the case of his efforts to make sense of cannibalism, Montaigne, like many of his contemporaries, appears to have drawn less on his philological skills than on his familiarity with the practice of feud or vendetta in France. Montaigne, that is, like Thevet and de Léry portrayed cannibalism as a ritual act at the core of New World conflicts that they read in light of their own experience with feuds or conflicts among powerful families in Europe at the time they were writing. This should not be surprising. While many traditional overviews of Europe have emphasized the ways in which monarchies and other forms of government were seeking to strengthen public law in the early modern period, feud, as the work of such historians as Edward Muir (1993) and Claudio Povolo (2015) have shown, continued to provide for public order throughout Europe's first modernity. As a result of his service in the Parlement of Bordeaux from 1554 to 1562, Montaigne would have been aware of deep tensions between the claims of public law and the continuation of the private forms of justice that persisted in the feud. And, indeed, during the wars of religion, as Stuart Carroll has argued, feuding intensified among France's nobility. In 1565 the Parlement of Bordeaux itself undertook an inquest in the Perigord of an outbreak of "*armed assaults, murders, robberies*" that were the consequence "*more of feuds and private hatreds than the diversity of religion*" (Carroll, 2003, 84).

And, indeed, structurally the conflict between the Tupnamaba and Tupinkin follows the classic form of the feud. Conflict between the two groups was regulated in a "vindicatory system" (Raymond Verdier, cit. in Carroll, 2003, 80). This was a system, that is, that served to regulate violence between two groups. It was highly ritualized and appears to have depended on such principles as proportionality and a deeply-felt culture of honor (Miller, 1990, 180–181). The question, therefore, must be asked to what degree legal understandings of the feud in sixteenth-century Europe may have shaped not the original, largely impressionistic accounts of Columbus and Vespucci but rather the more studied and analytical observations of the de Nobrega, de Sousa, Thevet, de Léry, and Montaigne. And here it would be extremely helpful to have a better sense of the ways in which jurists developed their analyses of feuding practices in the sixteenth century.

Furthermore, the *Essays* themselves are filled with references to vengeance and honor. Montaigne clearly deplored the ethos that fueled the outbreak of feuding in French society. Here he was in part following Innocent Gentillet's celebrated *Anti-Machiavelle*, published in 1576, in which Gentillet attributed the growth of feud to the malicious influence of Machiavelli, citing in particular his famous Chapter VII of the Prince as a model for favoring vengeance of reconciliation (Gentillet, 1968, 322). But that such matters were familiar to Montaigne is clear above all from his essay "Of Physiognomy". And David Quint has indeed seen Montaigne's *Essays* themselves as motivated in large part by a desire to replace the ethic of valor, which encouraged feud, with an ethic of forgiveness and reconciliation that would help end the cycles of violence that so deeply scarred France during Montaigne's lifetime (Quint, 1998, 4–14).

But Montaigne also borrows directly from de Léry's moral arguments. I began with the famous passage from Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals" in which he had asked the

reader not to be too quick to judge the barbarism of others. Thevet, it turns out, had judged the cannibal harshly. As he writes in Chapter LXI:

This rabble eats human flesh in an ordinary way, just as we eat mutton, and they take even greater pleasure in so doing. And you can be sure that it is not easy to free a man who has fallen into their hands on account of the appetite that they have to eat him... There are no beasts in the deserts of Africa or in cruel Arabia who hunger so ardently after human blood as these people who are even more savage than brutal (Quint, 1998, 317–318).

De Léry had made quite the opposite argument: “I could add similar examples of the cruelty of the savages towards their enemies,” de Léry observed, “but it seems to me that what I have said is enough to horrify you,” and then he invites his readers to consider the savagery in Europe.

Furthermore, if it comes to the brutal action of really (as one says) chewing and devouring human flesh, have we not found people in these regions over here, even among those who bear the name of Christians, both in Italy and elsewhere, who, not content with having cruelly put to death their enemies, have been unable to slake their blood thirst except by eating their livers and their hearts? And, without going further, what of France? ... During the bloody tragedy that began in Paris on the twenty-fourth of August 1572, among other acts horrible to recount, which were perpetrated at that time throughout the kingdom the fat of human bodies (an act in ways more barbarous than those of the savages) was it not publicly sold to the highest bidder? The livers, hearts, and other parts of these bodies – were they not eaten by the furious murderers, of whom Hell itself stands in horror? Likewise, after the wretched massacre of one Coeur de Roy, who professed the Reformed Faith in the city of Auxerre – did not those who committed this murder cut his heart to pieces, display it for sale to those who hated him, and finally, after grilling it over coals – glutting their rage like mastiffs – eat of it.....So let us henceforth no longer abhor so very greatly the cruelty of the anthropophagous – that is, man-eating – savages. For since there are some here in our midst even worse and more detestable than those who, as we have seen, attack or enemy nations, while the ones over here have plunged into the blood of their kinsmen, neighbors, and compatriots, one need not go beyond one’s own country, nor as far as America, to see such monstrous and prodigious things (De Léry, 2006, 131–133).

But Montaigne does not merely draw on Thevet and de Léry. He also develops a genuinely anthropological argument: let me be explicit here: he is concerned not simply with ethnography (that is, with the description of a particular culture) but also and above all with anthropology (with a general understanding of the human condition, and in teasing out what diverse cultures, despite their diversity, have in common).

And, it is in this context that he develops a distinction between nature and culture that will resonate down through Rousseau and beyond. It is a distinction, based in part on

such ancient writers as Virgil, that enabled him to overturn implicit hierarchies in which the civilized world of Europeans stood in a superior position to the savage world of the Tupinamba. As Montaigne observes, the Tupinamba “*are savages in the same way that we say fruits are wild, which nature produces of herself and by her own ordinary progress; whereas, in truth, we ought rather to call those wild whose natures we have changed by our artifice and diverted from the common order*”. And he then adds, “*these nations, then, seem to me to barbarous in this sense, that they have been fashioned very little by the human mind, and are still very close to their original naturalness*” (Montaigne, 1958, 152–153). Thus, the New World offers an example of a culture in which “*there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate or for political superiority; no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no dividends, no partitions, no properties, no occupations but leisure ones, no respect of kindred, no care for any but common kinship, no clothing, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat. The very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, belittling, pardon -- unheard of*”. And this argument provides Montaigne with his essential point: his essential deconstruction of the notion of savagery or barbarism: “*I think that there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice*”.

And then, as if to underscore the reality of a common humanity, Montaigne even points to the existence of cannibalism in the Ancient World and in early modern Europe. He provides examples of survivor cannibalism and even of the medicinal use of carcasses [and mummies], noting that “*physicians do not fear to use human flesh in all sorts of ways for our health, applying it either inwardly or outwardly. But there was never any opinion so disordered, as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty, which are our ordinary vices*” (Montaigne, 2004, see Himmelman, 1997, 198–200).

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It would not, however, be Montaigne’s account of cannibalism that would prevail. Another narrative, one that stressed the barbarism of the cannibals of the New World, would. By a remarkable coincidence it was another first-hand account of the Tupinamba, written almost contemporaneously with the French accounts of de Léry and Thevet. This was the best-selling account by the German adventurer Hans Staden; *Die Warhaftige Historia und Beschreibung eyner Landschafft der Wilden Nacketen, Grimmigen Menschfresser Leuten in der Newenwelt America gelegen* (1557) or *The True History and Description Savage, Naked, and Man-Eating Peoples Situated in a Country of the New World of America*, published in Marburg in 1557 and almost immediately translated into Latin, Dutch, and German (Staden, 1927, see Duffy & Metcalf, 2011).

Staden, a native of Hesse who likely served as *arquebusier* in the Schmalkaldic League, had set out from Germany with the original intent of traveling to India. But, after making his way to Lisbon and learning that he had missed the fleet to India, he settled in 1547 for passage to Brazil. He returned to Portugal the next year, and then in 1549 traveled back to Brazil. There he became a gunner in a Portuguese fort where he

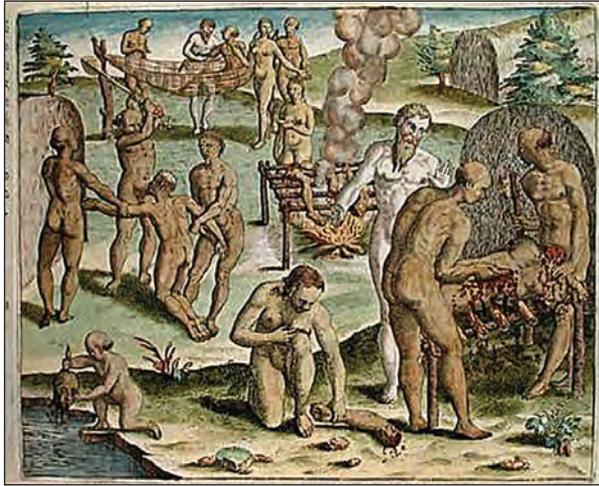


Fig. 1: *Scene of Cannibalism*, from *'Brevis Narratio'*, engraved by Theodore de Bry (1564) (Source: *Wikimedia commons*)

must also have learned the local language, for it was largely his knowledge of the Tupi languages that would save him when he was captured in 1552. At first, Staden, who when captured had been stripped naked and told that he would be eaten, was certain that he would die. But he managed to convince his captors that he was not Portuguese but German and that he could be beneficial to them as a kind of shaman. But, while he was not killed, he did live among them for nearly two and a half years, and this provided him with an opportunity to witness their cannibalistic rites first-hand. These he describes in great detail in his book, which he wrote shortly after returning to Europe in 1555. It should be noted that Staden had some help in the fashioning of his story. But there can be no doubt that the story did much to sensationalize the news of New World cannibals among readers in Europe. Above all, its illustrations would have an important and interesting afterlife.

For Staden's illustrations served as the basis for the illustrations of cannibals in the work that did the most to propagate the view of cannibals in early modern Europe. This was Theodore de Bry's *Collectiones peregrinatorum in Indiam orientalem et Indiam occidentalem*, published in Frankfurt in thirteen volumes, from 1590 to 1634. In volume III of this work de Bry publishes both de Léry and Hans Staden. What is quite striking is de Bry's use of Staden's images which he transforms – at once classicizing them and rendering the more fierce. In the end De Bry's images, more than his text, will help fix the European notion of the cannibal as a savage barbarian and this image would indeed play a role in legitimating the conquest and colonization of the Americas.

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At the end of his essay “On Cannibals” Montaigne recalled his encounter with three Tupi in Rouen in 1562. Montaigne had traveled there to join the young king Charles IX in this port city where several Brazilian natives were to meet the monarch. This was not the first occasion upon which native Brazilians had been brought back to France and presented to the king, but it is the first occasion in which we have a record of a conversation. We don’t know what words were exchanged with the king. We only know that, according to Montaigne, “*the king [himself] talked to them a good while, they were shown our ways, our splendor, the aspect of a fine city*” (Montaigne, 1958, 159).

But after the conversation with Charles ended, there was a general conversation between the Indians and the courtiers in attendance. Someone in the party (Montaigne does not say who) asked the Indians “*what of all the things they had seen they most admired.*

And concerning their response, Montaigne records the following:

They said that, in the first place, they thought it very strange that so many grown men, bearded, strong, and armed...should submit to obey a child [King Charles was indeed a boy of twelve at this time], and that one of them was not chosen to command instead. Second (they have a way of speaking of men in their language as halves of one another) that they had noticed that there were among us men full and gorged with all sorts of good things, and that their other halves were beggars at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that these needy halves could endure such an injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat, or set fire to their houses (Montaigne, 1958, 159).

This is not the only passage in which Montaigne draws on an expanding ethnography to critique his fellow Europeans – a move that would be reflected later by other such early modern writers as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot.¹ And such a move among early modern writers does much to complicate traditional narratives of Euro-centrism. To be sure, many European writers and intellectuals, as Edward Said and others have made abundantly clear, did develop deeply chauvinistic views about Europe’s superiority to the Middle East, to Asia, and indeed to Africa and Asia over the course of the nineteenth century, and certainly it is possible to discern adumbrations of such Eurocentric views in the early modern period. But it is also crucial to recognize that the relationship of European writers and intellectuals to the extra-European world of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and much of the eighteenth century was not rooted in either an economic or an intellectual framework in which it was possible to claim superiority over other peoples.

Montaigne at least is deeply impressed by what he learns not only about Asia but also about the Americas. Rather than viewing these other parts of the world as inferior, he saw them as different. He was impressed by what he called the awesome magnificence of the cities of Cuzco and Mexico (Montaigne, 1958, 693). But he was not merely a

1 Diderot, 1970–1979, cross-references to the Eucharist.



Fig. 2: Michel de Montaigne by Daniel Dumonstier
(Source: Wikimedia commons)

relativist. He was willing to make judgments about other cultures, at times viewing them as superior to his own. Certainly his report of the shock the Tupi expressed at the ravages of inequality in Europe is one example of this. But he also praised China both for its system of government and its technology. “China – a kingdom whose government and arts, without dealings with and knowledge of ours,” he writes, “surpasses our examples in many branches of excellence, and whose history teaches me how much ampler and more varied the world is than either the ancients or we ourselves understand – the officers deputed by the prince [not only punish but also reward]” (Montaigne, 1958, 820). And, in a fascinating passage on technologies, Montaigne reminds his readers that their pride might be misplaced. “We exclaim at the miracle of the invention of our artillery, of the compass, and of our printing,” Montaigne wrote, adding, “other men in another corner of the world, in China, enjoyed these a thousand years earlier” (Montaigne, 1958, 693).

In the end Montaigne would have found it absurd to forge a hierarchy of cultures. Barbarism is ubiquitous. It is found not only among the French, but also among the

Tupinamba. When the courtiers withdrew from their colloquy with the three Brazilian chiefs during the King's visit to Rouen in 1562, Montaigne was able – or so he claims – to converse briefly one-on-one with one of the Tupi. “*I talked to one of them a great while,*” he writes, and

asking him what advantage he reaped from the superiority he had amongst his own people (for he was a captain, and our mariners called him king), he told me, to march at the head of his men in war. Demanding of him further how many men he had to follow him, he showed me a space of ground, to signify as many as could march in such a compass, which might be four or five thousand men; and putting the question to him whether or not his authority expired with the war, he told me this remained: that when he went to visit the villages of his dependence, they cut him a path through the thick of their woods, by which he might pass at his ease. And, then, in the closing sentence, Montaigne quips: «Tout cela ne va pas trop mal : mais quoy ? ils ne portent point de haut de chausses.» –»That's not so bad. But what else can they do? They don't wear breeches” (Montaigne, 1958, 159).

KANIBALIZEM KOT RITUAL MAŠČEVANJA V ZGODNJEM NOVEM VEKU

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POVZETEK

V svojem eseju „O kanibalih“ francoski esejist iz 16. stoletja, Michel de Montaigne, zgodb o kanibalizmu ni opisoval kot pokazatelja kulturne inferiornosti. Zaradi svoje tendence k odkrivanju analogij med kulturnimi praksami geografsko oddaljenih skupnosti se je Montaigne izognil sklepanju o kulturno inferiorni praksi, saj je zaznal paralelne prakse, ki so potekale v Evropi – predvsem prakso fajde – maščevanja –, celo v Franciji njegovega časa.

Ključne besede: Montaigne, kanibalizem, relativizem, fajda, maščevanje, severnoameriški Indijanci

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