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Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society

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the New Tribes Mission's internal documents to present a damning picture of its violent methods, particularly with recently contacted peoples such as the Zo'é.

Claudia Menezes, Silvia Caiuby Novaes and Aloísio Cabalzar describe Salesians' tactics among the Xavante, Bororo and Tukano, as well as some indigenous artifices to retain their previous cultures. There are also studies of operations by Jesuits, Franciscans, and regular Catholic clergy competing with Protestants for the souls of the Karipuna in northern Amapá.

These fascinating essays can tackle only a few of the missionary endeavours throughout Brazil during the past half-century. The book is reasonably objective, avoiding the sometimes sanctimonious and self-congratulatory style of the missionaries themselves, or the invective of their opponents such as Norman Lewis. It is essential reading because it breaks new ground in examining this influence that is so important to the indigenous peoples of Brazil.

Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society.
Beth A. Conklin. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. xxxi + 285 pp.,
appendices, notes, references, index. \$50.00 (cloth), \$22.95 (paper). ISBN
0-292-071232-4, ISBN 0-292-071236-7. [utexas.edu/utpress]

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Beth Conklin turns the traditional academic debate regarding anthropophagy on its head in this highly readable and theoretically sophisticated book. The idea that certain societies practiced cannibalism in recent history, and in some places may continue to do so, is an uncomfortable and frequently challenged fact. Consequently, much of the debate involving cannibalism addresses whether or not it ever existed as an acceptable social behavior, or assumes that it could only have arisen as a consequence of a strong functional imperative. In contrast, Conklin avoids sensationalism and overgeneralization in her intimate and detailed cultural relativist account of funerary cannibalism among the Wari' of the Brazilian Amazon, who practiced cannibalism into the 1960s. In *Consuming Grief*, she addresses traditional academic concerns regarding the social motivations for cannibalism from the ethnographically informed position that in the case of the Wari', cannibalism makes sense. She rigorously demonstrates that Wari' cannibalism was a

compassionate act that served to distance the dead from the living and to help the living emotionally cope with loss.

In Part I, Conklin places Wari' cannibalism in perspective by discussing relevant aspects of contemporary Wari' society and sketching their pre- and postcontact histories. She also sets the stage by confronting her own research as being no exception to the rule that firsthand observations of cannibalism by anthropologists are practically nonexistent. In Part II, Conklin describes how Wari' remember and explain their funerary practices (both contemporary and historical) and relates them to prominent academic explanations of cannibalism. Of particular note, she distinguishes funerary cannibalism, or endocannibalism, from exocannibalism, highlighting how Wari' perceive the primary significance of the former to have been its role in the management of grief. Conklin substantiates her acceptance of this thesis in Part III by exploring Wari' notions of kinship, personhood and humanity in relation to the body, and by relating them to the various roles people played in funerals. Finally, in Part IV, Conklin proposes that Wari' favored funerary cannibalism over other forms of corpse disposal because it tangibly engaged Wari' identity with respect to the afterlife and thereby symbolically facilitated the transformative process of death.

A potential criticism of *Consuming Grief* is that it relies substantially on memory ethnography, which is susceptible to the imperfections of human recollection. Although this limitation causes her to leave some questions unanswered, Conklin convincingly demonstrates that memory ethnography can be an effective means to investigate undocumented aspects of cultural history. Through both internal and external analysis, Conklin meticulously verifies her data, thereby providing a strong challenge to the prevalent assumption that most (if not all) ethnographic accounts of cannibalism are false. Indeed, the personal detail with which she investigates Wari' perspectives of the topic exposes the ethnocentrism inherent in this assumption. Through its rigor, Conklin's study escapes such epistemological eddies, and goes on to reveal in a moving fashion how Wari' cannibalism was an expression of common human emotions and values.

Conklin's truly personal writing style lends a very human voice to anthropological theory. By staying close to her data and to her field experience, she guides the reader through many of the complex themes involved in Amazonian kinship and cosmology without appearing overly abstract. Similarly, she addresses potentially morbid topics with a tone of concrete humanity that renders them understandable and inoffensive. In addition, she takes Wari' explanations seriously, evaluating their theoretical potential by exploring the conceptual framework which motivates them. In sum, Conklin makes important connections between individuals, society and anthropology. As a result, her book is ideal in showing how theory speaks to real human experience—both lived and remembered.