



## “Cannibalism” in Southern Ethiopia

### An Exploratory Case Study of Me'en Discourse

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**Abstract.** – This article addresses alleged “cannibalism” among the Me'en of southwestern Ethiopia. As cannibalist representations in this area are rare, they represent a puzzle as to origins and current role. An explanation needs to address psychosocial representations and the cultural symbolism of life forces and fear of death, but reference should also be made to insecurities of descent and group relations among the Me'en population while expanding and migrating during the past century, partly absorbing preexisting populations in the process. This anxiety is reproduced today via conflictuous relations between descent groups vis-à-vis land and other resources. The discourse of cannibalism being internal to Me'en society and not directed to outsiders would tend to support this view. [*Ethiopia, Me'en, cannibalism, intergroup rivalry, ethnic relations, lineage/clan relations, cosmology*]

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### Introduction

Cannibalism or anthropophagy – the consumption of human body parts by other humans – continues to be a challenge for anthropological explanation. In various parts of the world and over hundreds of years this phenomenon has been reported – whether as a collective representation or as an actual practice. It never fails to evoke intense feelings of revulsion, outrage, and fear. From a human

evolutionary point of view, cannibalism is unusual and is always contested. As important as the question of its occurrence is that of the embeddedness of its representations in the discourses of social exclusion and demonization of others. In a recent overview, S. Lindenbaum (2004) has elaborated on the discursive representation of “cannibalism” and inventoried its many forms.<sup>1</sup> She emphasized that the exoticist/primitivist representation of others as such is quite universal as a feature of colonizing societies as well as present in modern-industrial societies that struggle with the inclusion of “others” in the form of immigrants, subaltern social groups, alternative lifestyle adepts, or criminals.

Nevertheless, discussions on cannibalism must always start with assessing the evidence for man-eating practices in any instance reported, and then proceed to assess its representational functions as a discourse of difference and distance. Recently, the African sociologist C. Toulabor (2000) has claimed the continued occurrence of cannibal practices among some contemporary political leaders in Africa. The former warlord and president of Liberia, Charles Taylor, has been accused of it by certain eyewitnesses during the civil war, as was ex-emperor Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic (*Telegraph* 2003;

1 While the “classical” form of cannibalism may be that of humans consciously eating parts of other (enemy) humans, Lindenbaum (2004: 47–49) mentions the following varieties: survival, psychopathological, medicinal, technological, sacrificial, innocent, and auto-cannibalism.

*New York Times* 1987). From the Congolese civil war – a massive conflict raging since the late 1990s – anthropophagy has often been reported, notably of armed militias against the forest-dwelling “Pygmy” people (e.g., Baka, Mbuti), whom they despise (Penketh 2004; *UN Report* 2003). These recent cases may be part of acts of autocratic elites deranged by their absolute power, or of war practices not rooted in a history of anthropophagy – at least not as a regular practice. But despite many ambiguities, the ethnographic record from both Africa and other parts of the world (e.g., Melanesia) has contained many examples of cannibalism (see also Lindenbaum 2004). A blanket denial of its existence, as done by some authors in the recent past (like W. Arens in his misleading and erroneous 1979 book), is clearly off the mark. Nevertheless, in the ongoing scholarly debate, the reported cases of cannibalism should be examined not only as actually occurring instances of anthropophagy but also, though not exclusively, as local representations in the specific social and cognitive environment of the groups concerned.<sup>2</sup>

In this article I look at one version of a particular “cannibalist discourse” which is encountered among several groups in southwestern Ethiopia, an area on the borderline of Nilo-Saharan- and Omotic- and Semitic-speaking populations, *not* particularly known as a location where (stories about) cannibalism or witchcraft predominate. For the interpretation of this intriguing phenomenon, reference is made to hypotheses offered by anthropologist P. R. Sanday’s general work (1986), emphasizing the psychodynamic aspects of cannibalism. Her core idea is that the rituals and workings of cannibalism should be placed within the framework of psychological mechanisms relating to people’s need to deal with the “forces of life and death” (Sanday 1986: xi) and the use of this understanding to control forces seen as necessary for the reproduction of society. This approach does not invalidate other ones, such as discourse analysis of “primitivist” representations,

etc. that certain groups make of others. But it looks at the immediate efforts that humans in daily life, and in precarious circumstances, make to enhance survival and cognize their wider environment, including other, only partly known human groups, past and present. While it is clear that in such an approach an analysis of cultural symbolism, as the accumulated outcome of meaning-creating acts of people, are very important, it does not preclude that environmental-economic concerns set the conditions for these representations – reflecting fear of scarcity, loss of survival chances, etc. – to arise. It would thus be preferable to combine a psychodynamic approach à la Sanday with a social-structural analysis that reflects the emerging tensions in a society, which in addition is “oral” in nature, putting great weight on the spoken word and its performance contexts.

Although the search for general features of the cannibalist representations and practices would merit encouragement, it seems that the Ethiopian case discussed here probably only covers the “mortuary cannibalism,” one of the categories distinguished by Sanday (1986: 25); not, however, the actually observed practice but only the persistent fear of it, expressed by local people. The similarities between cannibalism and witchcraft – with the latter also dominated by metaphors of “eating others” or the fear thereof, be it here with supernatural means – point to psychological factors related to interpersonal rivalry and jealousy and to the social conditions producing or reinforcing such feelings, is highly relevant. Indeed, the reason why cannibalism and debates about it generate such intense interest may be the universal fear of being annihilated in the act or threat of being eaten – reflecting utter helplessness and negation of one’s personality, one’s humanity.

The two more specific aims of this article are: a) trying to account for the persistence of the “apparently irrational belief” (cf. Sperber 1982) in cannibals or cannibal-like behaviour among some southern Ethiopian groups *without* there being any demonstrated, actual instances of it; and b) to work towards an explanation of the relation of such a collective representation with social and historical processes, the importance of which has as yet been difficult to unravel. Next to similarities, there are also differences between cannibalist representations and witchcraft discourse, which we still find typically in central and southern Africa, making many victims. While in Ethiopia there is the *zar* spirit possession cult and the occurrence of widespread sorcery-like accusations of *buda* (evil eye, people “eating”

<sup>2</sup> Instances of cannibalism as an actual practice are widely known even apart from “survival cannibalism,” which seems, however, mainly to occur among stranded Westerners in emergency situations, such as shipwrecks and plane disasters. The scholarly debate on the topic has moved beyond the facile argument of cannibalism as *only* being an image of evil activity projected onto others (which is the untenable thesis of Arens 1979). This argument was refuted by data presented by many authors (e.g., Brown and Tuzin 1983; Knauff 1985; Whitehead 1984; Abler 1992; cf. also Brady 1982). For modern transformations of “cannibalism”, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999.

innocent people), witchcraft in the central African sense (cf. *kindoki* in Congo, cf. Bockie 1993) does not occur in Ethiopia.

The case I discuss here in more detail is that of the Me'en people<sup>3</sup> in southwest Ethiopia (living in the current “Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Regional State”). This is a group of ca. 80,000 people, of which some 74,000 are shifting cultivators in highland areas (the Tishana-Me'en) bordering the Omo and Shorum Rivers, and another 5 to 6,000 are transhumant agro-pastoralists east of the Omo River (the Bodi-Me'en). They speak a Southeast Surmic language (which is within the large Nilo-Saharan group; cf. Unseth 1988; Dimmendaal and Last 1998). Other members of this group (in Ethiopia) are the Mursi, the Chai, the Tirmaga, and the Kwegu.

First a note on the distribution of cannibalist representations in the area under discussion. Notions or fears of anthropophagy/cannibalism are neither widespread among Surmic-speaking groups nor among other Ethiopian peoples. The agro-pastoralist Tirmaga and Chai (Suri), living in the same region as the Me'en, are traditionally not familiar with any idea of cannibalism, and neither are the Mursi or Kwegu. Other groups in the Maji area, like the Omotic-speaking Dizi do not speak of it either. But some other populations north and south of the Me'en have ideas on the existence of man-eating beings, e.g., the pastoralist Dassanetch (Almagor 1986: 268, n. 28)<sup>4</sup> and the

Para-Nilotic-speaking Nyangatom (or Bume)<sup>5</sup> – both of whom have no contacts with the Me'en. Also the Omotic-speaking Bench people to the north of the Tishana-Me'en mention it. With the Bench (formerly known as “Gimira,” now a pejorative name) the Me'en have extensive contacts: economic relations, intermarriage, consultation of their local diviner-healers. Substantial cultural interaction and “borrowing” has taken place. Notable is that the idea of cannibalism is “contagious”: as intergroup contacts, or at least rumours and stories about each other, have intensified in the past 15 years, one now finds stories about some people “perhaps” eating others also among some of the just mentioned neighbouring groups, e.g., the Dizi and Tirmaga. If it is historically rare, the question is why it emerged among these populations. One reason may be – but this is speculation – the impact of the representations of *buda*, people who are seen to have an “evil eye” and with their look can blight or “eat” others. This representation was a feature of northern Ethiopian society, where most of the (Amhara, Tigrayans) immigrants to the south since ca. 1898 came from. We see here a discourse of rivalry and jealousy, which in northern Ethiopia was tied to anxieties about claims to and inheritance of land, and about personal status and dignity in a hierarchical society.

Explanations of cannibalism have been of several kinds. Most traditional (neo-) functionalist anthropology has stressed the social order aspect: it is an idiom of accusation and counteraccusation between members of a relatively undifferentiated society, living closely together in a kin and neighbourhood network, whereby some are designated as witches, magicians, and/or even man-eaters facilitates the “release” of tensions and psychological anxieties. Symbolic and structural approaches have paid attention to the metaphoric and worldview aspects of cannibalist representations, and emphasized their place in an encompassing psychological-cultural code, with ontological referents (Sanday 1986 builds upon this approach).

persistence within Me'en society. A natural phenomenon which might have stimulated or confirmed the idea of a human grave being “emptied” (among the Me'en) is the fact that the surface of a grave may, after burial, slightly drop, for instance due to rains, and due to earth sinking down in the layer of stones in the grave. The relatives may notice this during the three-month mourning and vigil period on the grave after the burial.

5 Prof. Serge Tornay (Musée de l'Homme, Paris) informed me in 1988 that also the Nyangatom have a belief in a certain class of people active as “man-eaters.” There is no published information on this matter yet. The Nyangatom notion appears to be fairly similar to that of the Dassanetch.

3 Data for this article come from fieldwork in 1988, 1989–90, 1993, and 1999 in southern Ethiopia (Maji, Bachuma, Ch'ebra) and from interviews (19 and 23 February 1988) with Dawit (Lujmut) Abebe, born in the Bodi (Mela) area, living in Addis Ababa. I am grateful to Abeje Berhanu (Addis Ababa University), who in 1988 was a coresearcher in the field, and to the late Mekonnen Yahye, my field assistant in 1990–91. I am also grateful to Ato Tadesse Sella, who has kept me regularly up-to-date on developments in the Me'en area (2003–2006).

4 In a personal communication (1988), Prof. U. Almagor told me he suspected that there may be two possible reasons for the acceptance of the existence of (the idea of) “cannibalism” among the Dassanetch (from whom it may even have spread to other groups in the area). First, the occasional exposure of human bones from the shallow Dassanetch graves due to the erosion of land. These bones are then (presumably by outsiders) rumored to be “evidence” of their “having eaten” the dead. Secondly, the practice of a small group within Dassanetch society which secretly grinds human bones and keeps the dust as a charm for fertility, a practice probably brought from elsewhere. It is rejected by most Dassanetch, and nothing else is known about it.

Claiming that the presence of cannibalist ideas among the Me'en and other groups is the result of diffusion from, e.g., the Dassanetch, would in itself not explain its long

Cultural materialists (like Harris 1977 or Harner 1977) have tried to uncover the logic of cannibalism through an analysis of the ecological and dietary conditions of the society (in what is popularly but somewhat unjustly known as the “protein argument”). This theory claims that certain such conditions of protein scarcity and/or violent intergroup conflicts (e.g., in Fiji, or among the Iroquois Indians) may indirectly or unwittingly stimulate the adoption of cannibalist practices. They may also be upheld by a hierarchical sacrificial cult, as among the Aztecs.

In what follows, I will briefly sketch Me'en society, make a note on etymology, outline the belief in cannibals among the Me'en, and then comment upon the merits of various theoretical approaches. It will be argued here that the emergence and persistence of the “cannibalist discourse” can only be made understandable in view of history of changing “intertribal” relations in the area. The term “discourse” is used here in the sense of a historically specific, more or less internally coherent cultural language in a certain society, containing implicit and explicit propositions about natural and/or supernatural phenomena. The cannibalism discourse might be said to be related to structural features of the Me'en productive system and to the ambiguities of increased intergroup contacts, perhaps evoking cognitive insecurity about the implications and consequences of such contacts.

Exclusively “symbolic” interpretations of such “irrationalist” beliefs can be highly misleading. In his well-known work criticizing such approaches, Sperber (1980, 1982, 1996) rightly doubted the tendency to relegate to the “symbolic” sphere all uncomprehended statements of informants at the expense of more rationalist explanations, grounded in a proper appraisal of the cognitive functioning of the human mind in general, seeking pragmatic knowledge. This point should warn us against any easy metaphoric-symbolic (and also semiotic) interpretation. But it remains to be seen what can sufficiently explain the persistence of the notion of cannibalism, as it is emphatically stated by informants, despite a clear lack of empirical or experiential evidence. It seems that some of the above theories do certainly not explain enough neither the origin of the notion nor its status and role in Me'en society today.

### “Cannibals” in the Context of Me'en Society

The western or “Tishana”-Me'en are shifting cultivators in the highlands north of the small town

of Maji.<sup>6</sup> They lived in this area for more than a hundred years. It was formerly densely forested and lies at an average altitude of ca. 1200–1600 m. Me'en ethnohistory is complex (cf. Abbink 1992b), revealing a variety of origins of this population. It is important to note that Me'en-speakers took gradual possession of the highland, incorporating several indigenous groups of different ethnic origin and mode of subsistence in the process. As evident from their way of life, customs, and oral traditions, most Tishana-Me'en speakers descend from transhumant agropastoralists originating from the valley along the Omo River. This group was probably very similar to the present-day Bodi-Me'en, with which the Tishana still occasionally intermarry and share the self-name “Me'en.”

The main crops of the western Me'en are maize and sorghum. Other crops like teff, wheat, beans, sugar cane, and tobacco are cultivated partly for subsistence, partly for sale in regional markets. Additional activities are the garden cultivation of root crops and vegetables, hunting, and beekeeping. Small amounts of cattle, sheep, and goats are kept. Cattle is important as a medium for bridewealth and in ceremonies, burials, and some other rituals. But there is no comparable “cattle culture” as existing among the Bodi, Tirmaga, or Chai, who have a strong practical and symbolic preoccupation with cattle (in ritual, in marriage arrangements, in colour terms, in personal naming, material culture, etc.).

Me'en traditional social organization is based on a kin-ordered mode of production. The land is held by exogamous patrilineal “descent groups” or lineages called *du'ut* (= seed; an agricultural metaphor), which ultimately are derived from a limited number of overarching clans (called in Me'en, *shobok*, *kabi*, or *kabuchoch*). The male members, but also widowed females, have primary rights to the land possessed by the group. There was never any real land scarcity in this society – instead, one could speak of a “scarcity of people.” The main purpose of Me'en descent group sections, it might be said, is to gather as many people in the homesteads as possible, through multiple marriage (polygamy) and many children. The Me'en household groups are patrilocal. Women are brought into the lineage or clan territory from other groups (after the transfer of bridewealth in heads of cattle). But they keep a bond with their own group for certain ritual purposes and ceremonies.

<sup>6</sup> For some information on the history of the Tishana-Me'en, see Abbink (1992a, 1992b).

Villages or hamlets are very small and consist of members of extended patrilocal families, often three-generational. The Me'en traditionally had ritual chiefs (sg. *komorut*; cf. Abbink forthcoming), without real coercive powers. They were the hereditary, “priestly” mediators between the clan groups and Tuma, the skygod, guardian of rain and fertility. Elders regulated the affairs of the *du'ut* and its members. Men and women have full adult status only if they are married and have children. Until a man has earned sufficient bridewealth for the marriage, he is under the authority of the father. Deceased persons are buried in the territory of the *du'ut* (only by exception are women buried in the territory of their own *du'ut*). Burials are important social occasions, especially when the deceased was a respected male or female elder. Proper burial is a vital ceremony for the *du'ut*. It must ensure the passing of the spirit (*qalua*) of the dead person to the realm of Tuma, and it must, by placing the dead in *du'ut* territory, ensure the prosperity and growth of its surviving members. Nevertheless, the close relatives of the deceased often leave the place of death and settle in another part of the clan territory. Formerly they also could go to an unclaimed area to set up a household.

*Qamtut* is the name that Me'en people give to a category of persons claimed to have a “taste for human flesh.” Their activity is perceived to be of two kinds: 1. they are active at night, trying to get at the corpse of recently buried persons; 2. they “mark” or attack single, preferably young, people on isolated, unguarded spots, e.g., outside the village or in the bush.<sup>7</sup>

The former type approaches a fresh grave at night and by various magical means attempts to extract the corpse from it. This is one reason why the grave is guarded for three months by close relatives; males (i.e., clan or lineage members) at night, females in the daytime. After three months, the corpse in the grave is “no longer attractive” for the *qamtut*. There are instances of people having killed a suspected *qamtut* when roaming about at night near a grave. The second type of *qamtut* is said to unpredictably appear in daytime to approach people. They may touch and mark them, make them ill, kidnap them, cause their death, and then eat part of the victim. Marking means that they may touch people in a certain

manner – e.g., “taste” their fingers or bind their feet<sup>8</sup> – and may then at one time come back to take the victim and consume it.

Both types of *qamtut* activity are feared by many Me'en. The *qamtut* were said by most informants to originate from one clan (among the Tishana, from the Djogatch). Their activity is contagious: a woman or man married to a *qamtut* will also become one, often after “having been served with human flesh” or with a certain powder in their food without their being aware of it. The *qamtut* are now reputed to have “spread among all *du'uts*.” However, never has any one instance of a person eating human flesh been openly observed or been tried in the local courts. Government people obviously try to discourage all talk about *qamtut*.

The Me'en are often adamant in affirming the existence of the *qamtut*, but do not point them out publicly. In fact, they do not care whether skeptical observers share or understand the belief; neither do they intend to find out whether such suspected *qamtut* people “really” consume human flesh or not. They say that they simply have to reckon with the possibility. We may here, in terms of Sperber (1982: 169–171), perhaps speak of a “representational belief of semi-propositional content”: there is a commitment to the (possible) existence and characteristics of a category of persons called *qamtut* (the belief); but at the same time no clear or exhaustive interpretation of the statements and their entailments pertaining to the *qamtut* activity is intended (the semi-propositional content).

It may be seen that we have here an *endocannibalistic* representation: the *qamtut* – who may appear to have some of the characteristics of witches as familiar from the anthropological literature (see for a classical evocation: Smith Bowen 1964) – operate *within* Me'en society, threatening fellow Me'en.

## Etymology

A comparative survey of Surmic linguistic material shows that, as far as we know, the word *qamtut* (or related variants) exists among the Me'en only. Published linguistic data on the Me'en language are scarce. Conti Rossini (1914: 439) gives a word *komtut*, but with the meaning “uomo libero,” and refers to d'Abbadie's posthumous

<sup>7</sup> There was also an instance whereby ill people, lying in a clinic, were threatened by a *qamtut* – though this may also, like the other places mentioned, be said to be outside the familiar social context: in a clinic, run by outsiders, and at some distance from the homestead of the affected.

<sup>8</sup> This is what allegedly happened with the sick persons visited by *qamtut* in the clinic (see previous footnote).

book “Géographie de l’Éthiopie” (1890) which mentions *kumtut* as meaning a “rich, powerful man.” But Conti Rossini also mentions (1914: 446) *qāmtut*, meaning “orco, spauracchio pei ragazzi” (i.e., ogre). Ricci, in an impressive study of the “Mekan” (Me’en) language (1974), based on data gathered by an Italian doctor working among the Tishana-Me’en in 1939–41, mentions two related words: 1. *camtot* = “iettatore,” and relates it to the verb *camiday* (to consume, to devour); and 2. *camtut* = “antropofago.”<sup>9</sup> This is the present-day meaning (probably derived from the verb root /am-/, “to eat”; 1st person sg. /k-am/. The suffix /tu/ or /tut/ is unclear. The initial /k/ has become an explosive /q-/). Will’s dictionary of Me’en (1991) has *k’amt’ut* and gives the meaning “some one eating deceased humans.” But the probably older meaning of the word (in d’Abbadie 1890, based on data from the 1840s–50s) as “free, rich, powerful man” is intriguing, because it points to a dominant characteristic of witchcraft. The powerful position of a person in a small-scale, relatively egalitarian society is often seen as having been reached not by ordinary means: supernatural or witchcraft power (“at the expense of others”) must have helped the person. Whether such an interpretation can hold in this case remains to be seen.

### A Closer Look at the Elements of the *Qamtut* Discourse

Before proceeding, a word should be said on the myth of “Tishana cannibalism” that has been created by outsiders. The “Tishana”<sup>10</sup> were for a very long time a “security problem,” not being fully under politico-military control of the central government. Until the Italian invasion of 1936, the Me’en offered tenacious armed resistance to imperial Ethiopian forces and northern Ethiopian settlers (cf. Abbink 1992a). In the course of this confrontation, the Tishana gained the reputation – also among neighbouring peoples – of being cruel and warlike (Straube 1963: 18), and at the beginning of this century it was already reported that the neighbouring “Gimira” (= the Bench people) regarded the Me’en as being cannibalistic (cf. Cerulli 1956: 50). Interesting but rather question-

able are also the remarks of A. Hodson, a British consul in Maji in the early 1920s. In his fascinating travel account, he states that the Tishana often ate parts of their captives, after having tortured them (1927: 164; 1929: 29). It appears from his information – even if it were reliable – that any cannibalist acts were not a regular custom, but may have been occasional “war brutalities.” But it is stated by contemporary Me’en informants that there was certainly no ritual cannibalism and no exocannibalist “ideology” of eating the enemies in order to regenerate losses sustained or to imbibe their strength (as, e.g., among the Huron and Iroquois Indians, see Sanday 1986: 125 f.).

As in all such cases, it is difficult to say anything about the origins of the *qamtut* idea. While it also appears among the Didinga (cf. Cerulli 1956: 80) and the Murle people (Lewis 1972: 142), two agro-pastoralist Sudanese members of the Surmic-speaking group and culturally related to the Me’en, this similarity does not clear up its historical roots. Baxter (1972) has offered some arguments to explain the virtual absence of witchcraft-cannibalism among pastoralist societies. Although the Me’en descend from an agro-pastoral society – and still partly are, i.e., the Bodi – they are now mostly cultivators, focused not so much on pastures as on land. The cannibalist representation must have received its full force during more recent processes of sociocultural change and contact with other groups. But interestingly, the Bodi, who are ideologically and economically much more focussed on cattle and on the transhumant pastoral way of life, show as strong a fear of the *qamtut* as the Tishana-Me’en (cf. Haberland 1959; also evident from statements by my Bodi informant in 1988 and 1990). One remark of a Tishana-Me’en elder should also be cited: he emphasized that the *qamtut* were in the area *before* his *du’ut* settled there:

Our ancestors did not come with *qamtuts*. These came from streams, and from the earth . . . In former times, the *qamtut* were all persecuted and killed . . . But they will never disappear, especially not now that they have intermarried with Me’en, in order to survive. They are hard to recognize.

It can be noticed that in the present form of the *qamtut* idea among the Tishana-Me’en, they have – due to many decades of contact with the descendants of northern Ethiopians in the villages – endowed the *qamtut* more with the qualities of the *buda*, the representation of an evil eye-possessing person, “imported” by Amhara and

<sup>9</sup> Ricci notes that the linguistic informant of the doctor referred to a “supernatural monstrous being,” not to an actual practice of persons in Me’en society.

<sup>10</sup> *Tishana* is a Me’en greeting word under which Me’enspeaking people became known after their contacts with immigrating highlanders at the turn of the century.

Oromo settlers from the northern highlands (cf. Ricci 1974: 280).

The characteristics of the *qamtut* discourse, as reconstructed from Me'en statements, are as follows. *Qamtut* are antisocial, uncontrollable persons with the evil inclination of preying upon human flesh, at times dissociating themselves from normal social life. They roam at night, away from their home area. Apart from their spear, they often carry a knife on every hip. They possess secret knowledge of how to attract or influence human victims, or how to get a body out of the grave (e.g., tapping with a certain stick or reed). Some *qamtut* have also the power to cast a curse. If, for instance, a cow killed at the burial ceremony carries a hard ball of hair in its stomach, this is seen as the work of the *qamtut*, having cast a mark, and having preyed upon the deceased. There are no protective measures against *qamtuts*, except for the guarding of the grave (where the corpse – wrapped in a cowskin – is placed, minimally two, sometimes four metres deep in the earth, and covered with layers of wood, sand, and large stones). Suspected *qamtuts* can be slain on the spot. In one case already mentioned, a man was killed at night while he moved about unannounced near the grave of a recently buried old woman. Her son killed this man. After the deed, he fled from the area, fearing revenge from the *qamtut*'s relatives.

The *qamtuts* can never be publicly accused or pinned down to any demonstrable misdemeanor. They are the object of persistent rumours only, and they continue to live among the non-*qamtut* population. Me'en say it is impossible to say who is or will be a *qamtut*: any Me'en could be one. They just live a normal life amidst the other members of the village.

The earlier-mentioned second type of “cannibal,” active in broad daylight, is called *gorogoro*.<sup>11</sup> According to descriptions, they have a silent, intimidating power over individuals when they meet them on the path; they hypnotize them, so to speak. The victim becomes nervous, starts shaking after their touch and may become ill afterwards. When the victim does not recover but dies, it is said that the body will certainly be taken by the *qamtut*. Here one might liken their role to that of the classical witch, except for the fact that they can never be identified, be publicly accused, or called upon to surrender their victim. This difference

leads me to conclude that the *qamtut* representation cannot be explained successfully with reference to the phenomenon of witchcraft. Furthermore (and similar to other societies with a pastoralist ethos), the Me'en have no specific or elaborate theory about misfortune caused by human agents acting with secret magical means. What they know about this (cf. the *gorogoro*), is most probably derived from general Ethiopian notions about the “evil eye.” I will, therefore, not pursue the witchcraft analogy, because it does not appear to help in explaining the *qamtut* representation. In fact, this latter idea seems hardly connected to other ideological representations in Me'en society: neither to witchcraft nor to traditional healing, and only marginally to Me'en religious notions.

In sum, the following elements can already be discerned in the *qamtut* representation:

- Supernatural power: resorting to unknown magical means to extract the corpse from the grave or to cast a spell on people who may become inexplicably nervous, ill, or may die.
- Antisocial character: they are beings moving only at night or in deserted places, alone, beyond normal social control. Thus:
- Outsider status: exposed *qamtut* are not found to be members of the *du'ut* where they made their attack.
- Inversion of central Me'en values: the unthinkable consumption of human flesh instead of animal meat; the mocking of human death.
- Threatening the continuity of the *du'ut* by trying to prevent the burial of a deceased member in its territory. Thus, the passage of the “soul” of the deceased to the realm of Tuma is prevented. Especially if the patrilineal *qalua* spirit is not “appeased,” it will keep on disturbing the living members of the lineage. We will come back on these points in the following sections.

### The Cannibalist Discourse in the Light of Theory

If we follow a classical social-structural approach – stressing a link with witchcraft – to account for the cannibal idea among the Me'en, we find that the evidence is ambiguous. The *qamtuts* do not appear to be witches. Is the accusation of being a *qamtut* related to Me'en envy of personal success? Among the Bodi-Me'en indeed, the richest clan (the Degit) is claimed to be the clan of the *qamtuts* (cf. Klausberger 1981: 244). This would in some way support the early etymological evidence (see above). But my observations, as well as case stud-

<sup>11</sup> *Goro* means “path,” “road” in Me'en. *Gorogoro* means something like “those on the road.” The expression is: *Ani koi fatiyinani, gorogoro amanihu* (“When I go out alone, *gorogoro* will attack me”) and it refers to possible *qamtut*.

ies of influential, “rich” Me’en and informants’ statements to this effect, would tend to refute this. There is no significant correlation between being relatively wealthy and being suspected of being *qamtut*. Also in the case cited above (the man killed at night), it did not hold. The man killed appeared to be a neighbour of the household of the dead woman. He was a respected elder, though of another lineage. No particular enmity was said to have existed between the two households, though his fields bordered those of the deceased’s household, separated by a small stream. There may have been a potential conflict of interest, but there were no rumours to that effect. He was not particularly rich nor envied. Some Me’en saw the case simply as an instance of the “unpredictability” of *qamtuts*.

Peggy Sanday (1986) has considered three theoretical orientations in the study of cannibalism, none of them related to witchcraft. The “psychogenic theory” (Sagan) and the cultural materialist theory (Harris, Harner) will not be referred to in detail because (apart from the possibly cogent criticism of Sanday and others) the Me’en material is not readily explained by either theory. There was no real consumption of human flesh as far as we know, and even if there was, 1. the “aggression and frustration” (presumed to be at the basis of the “literal or oral incorporation” or eating of a lost beloved or an enemy) had other culturally mediated outlets in other domains of Me’en society; 2. ecological conditions did not determine the adoption of it – there was neither any serious population pressure nor a sudden decline of protein supply.

Sanday’s own theory, the most encompassing one, is a symbolic-interpretive approach which emphasizes the *ontological* basis of cannibal practice. When cannibalism occurs, it is always related to fundamental ideas about life- and fertility-(re)generating forces, notions about the contact of humans with the divine or spirit world. On the basis of an analysis of some crucial cases of cannibalism, Sanday argues that a full cultural interpretation reveals that cannibalist rituals, fuelled by “inchoate human desire” (1986: 54), “. . . expresses the ontological structures for being-in-the world in terms of which humans understand the forces of life and death and use this understanding to control vital forces deemed necessary for the reproduction of society” (xi). There is a legitimate reason to take the psychodynamics of cannibalist representations into account because, as said above, it reflects direct concerns and anxieties of people. But such representations and cannibalist practices are not

the direct result of presumably “given” self-evident ontologies, psychological tensions, and “needs,” and have to be tied to considerations of the social (reproduction) process in which these representations get their form and validation. In Sanday’s generalizing approach, attention to the logic and the mechanisms of social tension, to intrasociety dissent, or to infrastructural changes affecting the representation, tends to be underestimated. Not in every case of cannibalist discourse the ontological basis is always that strong and that autonomous. From our account we have seen that among the Me’en, continued fertility is expressed in maintaining the good relationships of the living with the spirits of the lineage and *du’ut* ancestors, which is in its turn guaranteed by an elaborate burial and proper passage of the *qalua* to Tuma. In this sense only, Me’en cosmology is important. But (the fear of) cannibal practice itself is not really related to it; the purported activity of the Me’en *qamtut* is hardly rooted in ontology as an encompassing cultural system. It is a discourse activated on certain occasions, when a latent social tension appears to come to the surface.

## Conclusion

Me’en have a strong and irrational fear of cannibals, i.e., in this case “corpse snatchers.” Irrational because no clear evidence is discussed or taken as decisive: no one ever actually witnessed an alleged cannibal eating the flesh of a deceased person taken from a fresh grave.

We saw that the Me’en discourse on cannibals is not directed at alien, outsider groups: there are no enemy (ethnic) groups categorized as “man-eaters.” On the contrary, the metaphor of the *qamtut* is directed to the Me’en group itself and appears to express in a metaphoric way two things:

1. an attitude or feelings of uncertainty concerning “origins” and possibly boundaries of lineage or clan group;
2. a fear of rivalry or competition between families or *du’uts* as (re)productive units.

To begin with the first point, it should be remembered that the history of Tishana and of Bodi ethnogenesis is one of conquest and intermingling of ethnically heterogeneous groups. Significant is in this context the Bodi fear of the “Kilingkabar monster,” related to an ancient population (the Kilingkabar), overrun by a proto-Me’en group (cf. Fukui 1988: 791) from which the Mela trace descent. This seems to be an instance of the im-

age of a “cannibal monster” that Sanday says (1986: xiii) can suggest “the projection of inner fears produced by stressful outer circumstances.” These may in this case have been related to conquest and tense relations between populations groups.

The settlement of the Tishana-Me’en in the highlands west of the Omo River is relatively recent (ca. 110–140 years). It meant increasing contact with new groups as well as the aforementioned incorporation of several culturally different subgroups, like Bench, Manja, and Kwegu people. The notion of *qamtut* may be a reflection of the ambivalence of this recent process of confrontation, taking place in conditions of leaderless dispersal of descent units (which has always been characteristic of Me’en settlement in the highland areas north of Maji). A *qamtut* may then be seen as a descendant of a submerged minority group,<sup>12</sup> not a “real Me’en” (*Me’en c’ím*) with uncontested rights to the *du’ut*/clan patrimony and *nganiya* identity (i.e., patrilineal consanguinal relatedness); and the Me’en fear that the *qalua* spirit threatened by *qamtut* will not arrive with the ancestral spirit’s transfer, thus endangering *du’ut* integrity, lineality, and territorial base. The hold of the *du’ut* on the territory always remains tenuous. No central order-enforcing mechanism traditionally regulated the spread and growth of the *du’uts*.

This leads us to the second point, which is related to the idea that the “balance” between the, in principle, equal *du’uts*, as more or less delineated landholding groups in conditions of relatively free access to land, might be upset. This socially and culturally strong-rooted idea of balance, reciprocity, and equality might be a relic of the pastoral era, when descent units similar to the *kabuchoch* (the original clans), formed on the basis of *nganiya* (patrilineal relatedness), were the framework of production and exchange, and also of ceremonial life. This egalitarian pattern may be disturbed by creeping differences in reproductive success of groups – some simply have better land, more children, more livestock, or consistently better harvests – giving rise to more durable patterns of inequality.<sup>13</sup> It is also likely that the pattern of reciprocity (*tachen* = exchanging) between the clans, and especially between

the lineages, e.g., in connection with bridewealth exchange obligations, is seen as threatened (which would the Me’en case make somewhat comparable to that of the New Guinea Melpa, see Sanday 1986: 81).

Inchoate social tensions between the constitutive units of the Me’en social formation, in these particular ecological conditions and at a specific low level of technological utilization of environmental resources, may thus be responsible for the persistence of the *qamtut* idea, whatever its ultimate *origins* – grafted on notions of reproduction of people, livestock, and crops in a defined territory. There was no ontologically grounded, powerful symbolic metaphor of transmitting human essence or psychic energy through the cannibal act. One could say that “divine hunger” (as Sanday 1986 called it) was never really a Me’en affliction. However, the extent of personal agony and mental insecurity or “tyranny” that the *qamtut* idea had on many individuals may have decisively contributed to the relatively large conversion movement towards Protestant Christianity among the northern Me’en in the past decade-and-a-half (1991–2006). Other factors stimulating this were the emerging desires for “modernity” and for alliance with a more powerful translocal religion brought (initially) by white strangers. The result was that many of the Me’en adopted a local form of Evangelical Christianity that seems to rid them of these fears and place their trust in a protecting God as well as link them, as they see it, to a wider community of materially and educationally more developed people on which cannibal fears would have no hold.

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I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of the late Ato Mekonnen Yayye, as a token of my respect for his assistance and friendship and in remembrance of his important work on the Me’en language and educational programs. Mekonnen was a native of Bach’uma village in the Me’en area, a kind and admirable man who died in 1994 of a fatal disease which paralysed him and took a way his speech and finally his life.

12 Compare the cited statement of the elder, see above.

13 There are now indeed notable differences in wealth between certain lineage segments and individuals. Some have given rise to “big men” (and not only from the group of hereditary *komurut*, i.e., rain mediators).

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