

Module 3, Discussion 1: Aztec Cannibalism

Main Topic

Michael Harner believes that the practice of human sacrifice and cannibalism in Aztec society stems from the lack of domesticated herbivorous animals in Teotihuacán and the surrounding parts of Central America. In past times, Mesoamerican peoples hunted candidate livestock in the region to extinction which, according to Mr. Harner's theory, left the Aztecs without a major and renewable source of meat protein. Wildfowl, such as the turkey, are mentioned as being the only form of consumable domesticated animal.

The theory seems sound to me because the need for meat was great and the population was very large—perhaps too large. The article mentioned that corn and beans were generally available and would meet a person's dietary needs, but drought was common enough to jeopardize it as being a reliable primary source of protein. Not surprisingly, multiple forms of food were required.

The records that are available to us today regarding the Aztecs are not specific about how many human sacrifices generally occurred annually. Numbers that were mentioned ranged from 20,000 to more than 80,000. Even an exact measurement of the population varies between two and eight million people, which is a very large discrepancy. This greatly affects the actual percentage of the population that might have used cannibalism as a regular source of food. More specific numbers would be necessary to determine if this reflects the claims made. As an alternate explanation, I would posit that the Aztecs merely used human sacrifice as a means of protection: by cultivating a reputation of strength among its adversaries through routine capture, merciless treatment and sacrifices of fellow humans.

Are we more civilized? I don't know. I haven't tasted human flesh yet. But I'm not terribly fond of pork so maybe that makes me more civilized. There are a lot of people that eat bacon, though. In all seriousness, I think it's one of those things that—whether civilized or not—we probably don't want to get in the habit of doing.

Re: Aztec Cannibalism (by Lindsey Affonso)

"It is really easy to have a knee-jerk reaction to this question, and say, 'Of course we are more civilized than those cannibalistic savages!'. The question remains, however, 'would we fail to utilize a resource in the same way given similar circumstances?'. There is no way to know if we would or would not. However, we have the technology to find alternate sources of protein if it were needed. On the other hand, were we reduced to a situation such as the Donner Party, would we turn to cannibalism?"

Valid point regarding the Donner Party. This also crossed my mind while responding to the topic.

I think that if there were thousands or millions of starving people, it would still be a line that would not be crossed by most (if any at all). We have mass starvation today in some countries in our world, but to my knowledge cannibalism has not resulted. So I guess this means that starvation, although horrible, is not an excuse to become uncivilized.

Re: To eat or not to eat... (by Erin Bullock)

"He points out how they realized that dogs had a need for protein as humans therefore were eaten."

I think you missed the point he was making with this one. Dogs were competing with humans for protein-rich foods. Since they can't graze on open land like a cow or a turkey, they make for poor livestock.