

THE DEBATE OVER *KAI TANGATA* (MĀORI CANNIBALISM):
NEW PERSPECTIVES FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE OF
THE MARISTS

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In the December 2007 issue of *JPS*, Hugh Laracy announced the forthcoming publication of letters written by the first French Marist missionaries in the Western Pacific. The nine volumes of the *Lettres reçues d'Océanie* (Girard 2009) contain over 7000 pages of primary source material about New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and many other islands from 1837-54. They are a vast source, once difficult to access and difficult to read, but now readily available thanks to the work of Father Charles Girard, SM and many others. Laracy describes the *Lettres reçues d'Océanie* as “the single most important foundational contribution to Pacific history in its fullest extent since J. C. Beaglehole’s magisterial editions of James Cook’s *Journals*” (2007: 383). There is plenty in the letters for anthropologists as well as historians and other scholars, especially since the Marists were not passing travellers but careful observers who lived and worked closely with Pacific peoples. Their correspondence features accounts of cultural practices across the Pacific that offer new perspectives and inform current debates in anthropology. This article draws on the correspondence to contribute to a topic that has recently been the subject of some controversy: *kai tangata*, the Māori practice of eating people. Anne Salmond summarises the broad lines of the debate in the title of her review of Obeyesekere (2005) by asking whether eating people in the Pacific was “fact or fantasy” (2007: 95). Obeyesekere (2005) concluded it was largely fantasy. In 2008, Paul Moon contributed vigorously to the debate, citing a wide range of sources to challenge Obeyesekere’s view of *kai tangata*. Neither scholar referred to the Marist correspondence, probably due to its relative inaccessibility before the Girard edition. This article will therefore offer new material to the topic. It aims to contribute to the debate, not to settle the issue conclusively. The first section of this article will consider recent literature associated with the controversy that has involved such prominent figures as Salmond, Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins. The role of the Marists and their relations with Māori will then be outlined so that the content of their letters can be better contextualised. The bulk of the article will focus on analysing extracts of the Marists’ New Zealand correspondence relevant to the debate about *kai tangata*.

THE DEBATE ABOUT *KAI TANGATA*

Europeans undeniably associated newly-encountered peoples in the Americas and the Pacific with cannibalism. In 1524, for example, one of Verrazzano's sailors was washed up half-dead on a North American beach. When the local inhabitants, who were completely unknown to the Europeans, lit a fire on the beach, Verrazzano's crew believed the young man would be roasted. He was instead placed near the fire to recover and then allowed to return to the ship (Quinn 1979: 283). Two other early French accounts shaped views of non-European peoples. Jean de Léry's 1578 tale of France's short-lived Brazilian colony described the Tupinamba and their practice of eating prisoners of war (Lestringant 2005). André Thevet's book on the same colony also discussed the practice and featured a sensationalist woodcut that has found its way into the iconography of cannibalism (1558: 75-78). As the Marists sailed to New Zealand nearly three centuries later, regardless of whether they had read de Léry and Thevet or not, images of limbs roasting over a fire would have been in their minds. Even if Thevet's work has been criticised for its inaccuracies while de Léry's has been praised by Lévi-Strauss as the "breviary of the anthropologist" (1961: 85), both authors had a lasting impact on the link between cannibalism and the non-European Other. Michel de Montaigne reinforced the link in his "On Cannibals", an exploration of cultural relativism that formed a part of his *Essais* (1580), arguably the most important work of the French Renaissance.

William Arens (1979, 1998) has asserted that cannibalism in every society he studied was largely European myth-making based on expectations of how non-Europeans behave. He conceded that occasional human sacrifice and consumption may have occurred within highly ritualised contexts, but maintained that widespread cannibalism did not take place. Gananath Obeyesekere offered the same argument in his study of accounts of cannibalism in the Pacific, carefully distinguishing cannibalism, a European "fantasy that the Other is going to eat us" (2005: 14), from anthropophagy, the eating of people, which he admits did occasionally occur (2005: 15). Frank Lestringant (1997), a specialist of French Renaissance travel writing, has argued that European reports of cannibalism involve two layers: the European fantasy of the Other, enhanced by such imagery as the explorer in the cauldron, and the reality of the cannibal. Lestringant strips away the fantasy to contextualise cannibalism as a cultural practice in some societies, notably the Tupinamba of Brazil. Arens and Obeyesekere have argued, however, that once the European fantasy is stripped away, almost nothing remains (see, for example, Arens 2006). It is simplistic to say that they deny cannibalism—Obeyesekere states unequivocally that his research affirms

anthropophagy (2003: 18)—but it is perhaps reasonable to state that they view any account of cannibalism with very deep suspicion.

Lestringant and Arens focused on early transatlantic contact, where the time depth of several centuries has allowed the layers of exaggeration and legend to build up.¹ Obeyesekere has concentrated on the more recent area of Pacific contact with Europeans. After considering the case of Captain James Cook's death in Hawai'i in a lengthy and controversial debate with Marshall Sahlins (1995) and others, Obeyesekere (1992, 2003) examined cannibalism in Fiji and New Zealand, where reports of the practice date largely from the first half of the 19th century. The time depth is shallower but European expectations of cannibalism were perhaps just as prevalent as several centuries earlier. Proof of the argument that cannibalism is mostly fantasy requires the rejection of both accounts and archaeological conclusions of people being eaten. The debate over the Fiji case in particular featured a strong exchange of views involving Arens (2003) and Obeyesekere (2003) on one side and Sahlins (2003a, 2003b) on the other. In the case of *kai tangata*, Ian Barber's comprehensive critical review of the ethnographic and archaeological record of Māori cannibalism before 1815 concludes that, in spite of some dubious accounts or questionable interpretations, "a compelling case emerges for the occasional practice of cannibalism among late 18th-century Maori communities of both the North and South Islands" (1992: 280).

Obeyesekere took issue with superficial visitors to societies that supposedly practiced cannibalism. Thevet, he says, "lived in the vicinity of the Tupinamba only for about ten weeks" (2005: 5). Credulous travellers, according to Obeyesekere, did not actually witness the act but heard what they wanted to hear or simply lied about it, citing cannibalism as both a defining trait of the Other and as a means of inspiring the reader's admiration of their intrepidity. For New Zealand, the argument is particularly problematic, given the multitude of relatively recent descriptions of cannibalism. Obeyesekere went even further when he argued that Māori performed cannibalism as a parody of European expectations of their behaviour. He cites very few accounts of *kai tangata* and builds up a picture of occasional ritualised cannibalism becoming widespread after European contact. Anne Salmond, in her review of Obeyesekere (2005), criticised among other things his sweeping rejection of indigenous sources on the grounds that they were contaminated by the colonial process (2007). Kumoll noted that indigenous Hawaiian responses to the Cook controversy have been highly critical of both Sahlins and Obeyesekere (2010: 70), exemplifying the view of many Oceanic scholars that "Western social science is considered to be an epistemological continuation of political colonialism" (p. 75). At the same time, while indigenous peoples may feel that it is for them and not outsiders to interpret their culture, such an islander-

versus-outlander viewpoint risks perpetuating colonialist divisions centred on otherness (p. 76). The situation of the Marist missionaries, as will be seen in the following section, challenges the simple dichotomy of otherness.

Both Obeyesekere and Moon have quoted descriptions of *kai tangata* written by missionaries; Moon discusses Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries like Samuel Marsden and Henry Williams while Obeyesekere deconstructs a text by Wesleyan missionary Samuel Leigh. Obeyesekere, like Arens, is very sceptical of missionary accounts, although both scholars tend to question the veracity of any account of cannibalism. They accuse the writers of being poorly educated, too gullible, too young, too old or simply lying. “The commentator, typically an explorer, missionary or anthropologist, is self-romanticised by the experience of a sojourn among a once cannibal people” (Arens 1998: 41). “Missionary reports on native cannibalism when they reach their European reading public or are incorporated into biographies, cast the missionary into the heroic role of someone living in dire danger among cannibals,” writes Obeyesekere after dismissing Leigh’s purported eyewitness account of cannibalism as “a calculated lie” and “lying in the interests of truth” (2005: 115). Such sweeping rejection of missionary reports is perhaps too easily deployed to suit his argument (see Sahlins 2003b), since European missionaries of the last five centuries have often doubled as ethnographers. It is difficult to dismiss the work of Bouton (1640), Pelleprat (1655) and Biet (1664) on the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean, for example. Colonial administrators, soldiers and settlers rarely showed much interest in the indigenous peoples they encountered, but “whilst a trader could make do with a minimal amount of cultural curiosity, for a missionary it was necessary to learn languages and interpret the roots of various systems of belief and behaviour” (Rubiés 2002: 248). The following section, which summarises the first Marists’ experience in New Zealand, their cultural background and their reasons for writing, is essential to any deconstruction of what they said about *kai tangata*.

THE MARISTS IN NEW ZEALAND

The Marists, members of the Lyon-based Society of Mary, came to New Zealand to convert Māori to Catholicism. Led by Bishop Jean-Baptiste-François Pompallier, the first group of Marists arrived in the Hokianga in January 1838 and soon moved to Kororāreka. More missionaries arrived over the next five years before the Society of Mary lost confidence in Pompallier and stopped sending him priests. The Marists founded stations throughout New Zealand, especially in the northern half of the North Island, and travelled

constantly within their vast parishes. The charismatic Pompallier acquired great *mana* as he distributed gifts during visits to Māori, but the priests he stationed often felt abandoned by their Bishop. Delays in funding as well as Pompallier's improvident spending caused the missionaries great hardship and severely tested their resolve. A rapidly-growing Irish Catholic immigrant population put more pressure on the Marists as they were torn between their original mission and parish work in the towns. They were withdrawn from the Māori mission altogether during the wars of the 1860s; their return a generation later and subsequent work will not be considered here (Harman 2010; O'Meehan 1992; Piper 2005; Simmons 1978, 1984).

The Marists had a different perspective from other early writers in New Zealand. Outsiders in what was essentially a Māori-British Protestant interface, they were well-educated young men who brought a background shaped by French cultural history and the nature of being Marist. France's recent cultural history had been characterised by uncertainty and insecurity; the first Marist missionaries to New Zealand were all born during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars that had greatly changed centuries-old social structures. The wars had ended in defeat for France, while Britain was on the imperial ascendant. British writers in New Zealand could easily transfer assurance of their nation's military and colonial supremacy to belief in British cultural superiority; France's imperialist "civilising mission" would not come until later in the century. While Britain's Enlightenment had featured a strong commercial streak, France's, viewed through the Revolution, had been individualistic and romantic. In 1802, Chateaubriand's *The Genius of Christianity* became the basis of French romanticism and the revival of Catholicism. It included *Atala*, the most famous part of the work, which tells of two runaway noble savage lovers and their encounter with a Catholic missionary in the North American forest. Many intertextual links between *Atala* and the Marists' New Zealand writing show how strong romantic concepts like the noble savage must have been in the Marists' minds when they met Māori. Pompallier's instructions to his missionaries, for example, were remarkably enlightened for the time and advised his priests to work with rather than confront Māori traditions and spirituality (Piper 2005: 21).

The Marist philosophy also shaped the missionaries' perspective. Their order required them to be *ignoti et quasi occulti in hoc mundo* 'hidden and as if unknown in the world'. They had taken vows of celibacy, poverty and humility. They genuinely had no desire to make money. The priests never had a commercial relationship with Māori and even during their deepest financial crisis in 1842 they resorted to begging for food rather than becoming traders to alleviate their poverty. They bought land solely for subsistence in lots of

one or two acres when rival missionaries were buying thousands of acres.² Boastfulness, embellishment or portraying oneself in a heroic light was for the Marists a betrayal of their order's values. They were aware that Māori derided them for their celibacy and poverty, but respected their humility.

The Marists' letters, even those addressed to family and friends, passed unsealed through Superior-General Father Colin's hands. They varied greatly in tone and content. Many were in effect reports to head office that described administrative difficulties and shortages of resources. If Māori were mentioned in these reports, it was generally to praise their intelligence or to lament their corruption by Europeans. In such contexts, the Marists did not identify with the other Europeans in New Zealand, an important point that will be revisited later in this section. These reports also recounted current events in New Zealand that might have a bearing on the mission's future.

Other Marist letters recounted to friends and family the missionaries' personal experiences in New Zealand. Sometimes the priest said he was copying directly from his travel journal (almost certainly now lost [but see Serabian 2005]), and these letters are perhaps the most serious and accurate of all the correspondence. Some letters were clearly aimed at publication, to be read out to seminarians and congregations or to appear in the missionary journal *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*. Missionaries often adopted a literary style in these letters, striving for the picturesque and the sensational. While they never adopted a boastful tone, they did abandon their sober style for clichéd expressions laden with adjectives.

Given the intense scrutiny applied to references to cannibalism in early travel accounts, the following points need to be made. Firstly, the Marists' letters are not recollections written decades after the event and exaggerated or distorted by fading memories. These are not the rambling reminiscences of an elderly settler who as a teenager heard talk about a cannibal feast. There is an immediacy that gives greater value and reliability to the writer as "mediator between 'ourselves' and what is out there beyond our sight" (Greenblatt 1991: 122). Secondly, the Marists were not in New Zealand for a short visit. They spent many years in Māori society, becoming fluent in the language, engaging in lengthy conversations and acquiring enough knowledge of Māori culture to appreciate its complexities. And thirdly, while the writer could never be completely detached, the humility of the Marists is worth noting as an obstacle to embellishment or to making themselves heroes rather than observers. After more than two years of almost total immersion in Waikato Māori culture, Fr Séon wrote: "Experience teaches me every day that many things I thought I understood about the customs of these peoples were only half understood, and that I may have led you into error about several points" (January 1844, 303 [2]).³ Similarly, rather than being a bold hero among

ignorant savages, Fr Servant acknowledged he was in the wrong: “Not yet familiar with their customs, I failed to respect their rules of courtesy. They were displeased with me but forgave me after I explained my behaviour in a speech to an assembly, and peace was restored” (15 October 1839, 39 [3]). Another example emerges from a comparison of accounts of simultaneous journeys to Lake Waikaremoana by Marist Fr Baty (18 January 1843, 232 [5-31]) and by lay missionary William Colenso (Taylor 1959: 1-57). Baty was a priest on a spiritual journey while Colenso’s tone was that of a heroic explorer taking possession of the landscape (Jennings 2010).

Overall, then, the immediacy, knowledge and humility of the Marists’ correspondence are encouraging factors in any assessment of their reliability. Arens might have considered the Marists’ letters dismissively among “the reports of missionaries, explorers, sailors and their ilk” (2003: 19), a statement that rejects almost every description of cultural encounter before the 20th century. A more balanced view would acknowledge that their letters deserve serious consideration.

The Marists’ correspondence is not of course completely objective, but what makes it so useful a source of information about Māori is that the principal target of their bias is the Protestant missionaries. Rather than a simple dichotomy of Marist as Self and Māori as Other, the Marists found several marked Others in New Zealand: Māori, the British, and Protestant missionaries. They had little good to say about the sailors and settlers, whose behaviour they believed debased Māori, but they reserved their most subjective writing for their religious rivals. On Todorov’s axes of alterity, one could consider the British missionaries as the extreme Other, and Māori in consequence as closer to the Self (Todorov 1992: 185). The romanticised view of the noble savage epitomised in *Atala* could only enhance this view. Thus Fr Garin wrote “I say natives and not savages because the term is less odious” (12 June & 17 July 1841, 99 [26]). “The New Zealanders have an ardent wish to learn,” wrote Fr Reignier from Rotorua in 1843. “A great number know how to read and write; they have a great natural ability and an extreme desire to know everything” (23 December 1843, 299 [14]). Garin believed that “this people is more susceptible to instruction and civilization than the peasants of France” (12 June & 17 July 1841, 99 [26]). Servant revealed cultural relativism in writing: “They often improvise when they sing, and their songs, which are modulated in a sweet and poetic manner, have great charm for them, but not always for Europeans, who are rapidly bored by the monotony” (15 October 1839, 40 [4]). Séon did the same in a long letter in which he sometimes seemed to identify more closely with Māori than with Europeans. “The inhabitants of New Zealand are generally handsome. In wishing to add to their natural beauty, they disfigure themselves in the eyes

of Europeans with their tattoos” (January 1844, 303 [12]). Other Marists also praised *moko*. They even approved of some Māori cultural practices while criticising British ones, so a simple Self-versus-Other dichotomy does not apply to their situation in New Zealand.

THE MARISTS AND *KAI TANGATA*

Before arriving in New Zealand, the first Marist missionaries already believed that Māori were cannibals. As he entered the Pacific for the first time, Pompallier mentioned cannibalism as a general characteristic of non-Christian peoples (9 August 1837, 20 [8]), illustrating perfectly Obeyesekere’s affirmation that cannibalism is linked to alterity (or otherness). The Marists nevertheless had specific reasons to believe in Māori cannibalism. They would certainly have known of Marion du Fresne’s death in the Bay of Islands (Crozet 1783) and had quite possibly read about Cook’s voyages. They may well have discussed an incident of the d’Entrecasteaux voyage, which paused briefly in Northland in 1793 during its search for the lost French explorer La Pérouse. Labillardière, the naturalist of the expedition, stated “it is known that these people relish human flesh” (1986 [1800]: 59). He then recounted the following incident:

One of the crew offered one of them [a Māori man] a knife; but wishing to show him how to use it he pretended to cut off his finger, which he immediately carried to his mouth, pretending to eat it. At once the cannibal who was watching his movements was filled delight and we saw him laugh heartily for some time. (p. 59)

Note that Labillardière used the word “cannibal” instead of “native”. While the incident doubtless confirmed for the French sailors that Māori were cannibals, viewed from the other side it appeared just as likely to show Māori that the French were cannibals.⁴

Once they were in New Zealand, the Marists found that Māori had strong social structures and complex cultural practices. The priests wrote of many aspects of Māori culture, but very rarely mentioned cannibalism. In some 2,000 pages of correspondence from New Zealand, cannibalism is mentioned perhaps two dozen times. Nine of the pioneer Marists discussed it in their letters home. Although there were no eyewitness accounts of cannibalism, the Marists’ wide knowledge and experience of Māori culture means that their writings cannot be dismissed as mere hearsay but instead deserve serious consideration.

In May 1842, Taraia of Ngāti Tamatera led a Hauraki war party on a raid of Ongare Pā near Katikati in Tauranga Harbour. People in Kauarenga on the Firth of Thames told Ensign Best that two chiefs were killed and partly eaten (Taylor 1966: 363). CMS Missionary A.N. Brown in Tauranga also

mentioned the raid and subsequent “cannibal feast” in his diary (1990: 56). Also in Tauranga, a Marist missionary wrote about the incident. On 31 May 1842, Fr Reignier, who had been in New Zealand for just a few weeks, arrived in Tauranga and met Pezant, who was looking after four gravely wounded Māori. Since Reignier could presumably not yet understand Māori, it must have been Pezant, resident at the Tauranga mission for a year, who explained to him that the invalids were survivors of the Ongare attack. Reignier reported that the raiders had “gone so far as to eat several chiefs of the vanquished” (1 June 1842, 173 [6]).

We can extract a great deal of information from Reignier’s simple statement. He wrote it just a few days after the raid, so it is not a half-faded recollection. It is consistent with Best’s account, even though the two men’s Māori sources were on opposite sides during the raid. It also agrees with the diary entries of his bitter rival Brown. There is no reason to doubt any of the three sources, and each confirms the others. Reignier’s statement appears in the context of a brief letter to the Marist Superior-General that seeks neither publication nor glorification, but merely informs him that the missionary has arrived in New Zealand. The letter’s matter-of-fact tone contains nothing sensational or exaggerated that would make one doubt Reignier’s word or even suspect he had invented the statement to discredit the Protestants. The quoted phrase is the only reference to cannibalism in the report and is almost an aside. Reignier’s focus was not cannibalism but the fact that by eating the vanquished chiefs the nominally Protestant raiders had embarrassed the Protestant missions. In effect, for Reignier, the Other was Protestant first and Māori afterwards. The words “gone so far” suggest cannibalism was considered unusual at the time. Finally, the assertion that only chiefs among the defeated were eaten hints at human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism rather than the eating of people as a food source.

Reignier affirmed the link between cannibalism and captured enemies. In December 1843, after 18 months in the Rotorua mission, he wrote what might be called a general essay on New Zealand to the director of his former seminary. He consciously adopted a rhetorical style, talking about the whaler’s “fatal harpoon”, for instance, as if his letter would be read out loud to the boys of the seminary (299 [5]). Reignier wrote that Māori were “divided into independent tribes, and once had an unbridled passion for war and the custom of eating their conquered enemies. Such scenes of horror have occurred during my time in New Zealand” (23 December 1843, 299 [14]). In Maketū in the Bay of Plenty where he had been based for nearly a year, Fr Borjon wrote about a journey with a group of Māori warriors seeking a peaceful resolution to a dispute. He then described Māori warfare practices and concluded: “Fortunately these peoples have lost much of their warlike

humour and it is believed that there will be no more of these destructive wars that usually end in the extermination of one side, in the pillage of harvests and houses, and in cannibalism” (16 May 1842, 158 [9]). Beneath the clichés, both statements point towards ritual cannibalism associated with war rather than the widespread eating of people for food.

Unlike many European writers, the Marists directly linked *kai tangata* to chiefly *mana*. Fr Rozet, praising the wisdom of the Maketū chief Tangaroa, wrote “he is a great warrior, a true cannibal who has often eaten his fill of the flesh of his vanquished enemies” (10 October 1841, 112 [7]). On Bank’s Peninsula in the wake of Te Rauparaha’s campaign, Pezant found very few Māori. “The terrible Tarauparaha, pronounced Torobolo in French, a warrior from the north of Tawai-Pounamou [Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island], one of the greatest man-eaters of New Zealand, destroyed the inhabitants of the peninsula” (30 January 1841, 86 [3]). Garin described the two powerful Bay of Islands Ngāpuhi chiefs Rewa and Moka, both keen supporters of Catholicism. “I was present at the baptism of one of the greatest chiefs of New Zealand, the famous Moka. In his time he was a formidable warrior, and his belly was the tomb of many of his enemies, since once they were killed he would eat them” (10 October 1841, 112 [10]). Rewa had “eaten so many men that we used to say his flesh must be made of the men he had eaten. You would not think so if you saw him. He looks kind and affable, and he is in fact” (12 June and 17 July 1841, 99 [72]). Contrast these views with more typical European accounts of the time. George French Angas, for example, believed he saw proof of cannibalism in chief Ngatata-i-te-rangi’s “bloodshot and savage” eyes (1847: 235).

Who were the sources of the priests’ comments? Outside the Bay of Islands, they were almost certainly Māori. The Marists spoke Māori much better than English, and spent far more time with the indigenous inhabitants they had come to convert rather than with the British settlers. One might try to dismiss Bay of Islands remarks as hearsay from fearful Europeans but Garin, discussing the Māori practice of eating enemies killed in battle, said “several of them admitted to [Pompallier in Kororāreka] that they had eaten it and that they found it very good”. He added that “although these people are man-eaters, they do not look frightening or cruel; it is something they do as calmly as a man who eats a chicken after having killed it” (99 [44]).

Two other Marists gave further information about *kai tangata*. Fr Baty, walking in thick forest near Lake Waikaremoana, saw offerings in the form of branches thrown at the base of a tree believed to house the god of weather. In the margin of his letter—literally an aside, an afterthought—he noted “until now I have been unable to find other sacrifices in New Zealand, except that when a pa was captured by the assailants, they would cook a man

who would be eaten only by the priests after being offered to their gods” (18 January 1843, 232 [24]). Baty’s term “priests” was probably a translation of *tohunga* or *tohunga ahurewa* ‘experts in traditional lore’ drawn from chiefly ranks. Reignier, in the letter to his former seminary director, offered more details when explaining the role of what he believed were his indigenous counterparts. “When the body of a chief killed in battle is to be eaten, the priests are first to give the order to roast it, and greedily eat the first mouthfuls of flesh as the due of their gods” (23 December 1843, 299 [14]). Here Reignier strayed into the sensational with the adverb ‘greedily’.

Another example of sober style being sensationalised for publication occurs in a letter by Fr Servant. In the following extract, he begins with his opinions, positive and negative, based on his own observations of Māori. Then he reports a second-hand account and the language changes, becoming sensationalist.

They are warriors in all they do and remind me of the ancient Gauls. But it is only too true that their excellent qualities are joined by monstrous faults and a terrible ferocity above all towards their enemies and their slaves. Eyewitnesses have told me that these peoples had and still maintain in many tribes the custom of anthropophagy, that in their terrible meals these inhuman men would eat the raw and still quivering flesh while saying *Kapai*, that is, it’s good. (16 Sept 1838, 31 [19])

As it stands, the extract is contradictory in its praise and condemnation of Māori. A closer reading reveals that the cannibal myth lies in the adjectives. Strip away Servant’s adjectives and the extract sounds factual. Similar sensationalism appears in the letter Reignier wrote to his parents about the Ongare raid.

We were sorry to learn that a band of savages had just ambushed a rival tribe, and that several natives were massacred. The bodies of the vanquished were cut into strips and devoured by the victors. This horrible scene carried out by Protestant Kanacks greatly discredited the sect and covered it in confusion. As a result, the islanders have embraced the Catholic faith in great numbers.... Perhaps you dread that I too will become the prey of cannibals. Have no fear, I beg you. It is true that the people I live among once had the horrible custom of devouring the steaming flesh of their conquered enemy, but, thanks to the blessings of religion, these scenes have become extremely rare. I am as safe here as in France. (30 March 1843, 249 [3-4])

Again, it is adjectives like “steaming” and other deliberately-chosen emotive words like “devour” that create the sensation. The Marists generally referred to Māori as natives or New Zealanders, but in his desire for sensationalism, Reignier seems to have mixed in all the terms he could think of, from “savages” to the very rare (for the Marists) “Kanacks”.

In a letter to the pupils of the minor seminary where he had been a teacher, Garin tried to thrill his adolescent readers with tales of life as a missionary. Here again was writing designed to confirm stereotypes about cannibalism. The priests were safe among Māori: “they do not eat foreigners because, they say, their flesh is too salty” (12 June & 17 July 1841, 99 [44]). Note how in the following quote he places himself and his readers in the scene:

They used to have native slaves they fed like pigs and forced to work, then killed them to eat. It has often happened that in wars there were two or three hundred bodies laid out on the ground. This was a windfall for the victors. They would cut them into pieces for you, hanging the arms, legs and other pieces on the stakes around their houses that form a square palisade, which they call paz, so that the dogs would not eat them. They would put a great quantity in a hole in the ground, then covered it with charcoal and in this way roasted them to feast on them. (12 June & 17 July 1841, 99 [79])

Garin, writing from Kororāreka, had been in New Zealand for a month and had certainly never witnessed such events. He was the only Marist to mention the fattening-up of slaves. The pronounced plural in “paz” shows his ignorance at the time of the Māori language and suggests he was repeating an English source. The claim of frequent battlefield slaughters is invalidated by simple demographics. The Māori population was simply not big enough to sustain the regular loss of two or three hundred people in battle. There is possibly a core of truth in Garin’s lurid account, perhaps a Musket War massacre in the early 1820s during the Amiowhenua campaign. Fr Servant heard the following tale near Hokianga Harbour:

I was overtaken by bad weather and obliged to spend a day and a night in the vast cave of an enormous rock with a certain number of natives. While speaking with an old man I learnt that once beneath this same rock had stayed victorious warriors who, in a single battle, had cut the throats and eaten a thousand of their kind! This same cave, formerly the lair of ferocious beasts in human form, is today a place of peace where we pray and where hymns of the Lord ring out! (28 May 1841, 93 [10])

Again, the old man’s exaggerated story was probably drawn from an event of the Amiowhenua campaign.

Like Servant in the previous quote, several of the priests used cannibalism both to symbolise non-Christian otherness and to justify their mission. “Peace and the union of hearts and souls reign where once division and anthropophagy worked cruel ravages: such are some of the successes of the Catholic missionaries,” wrote Pompallier from Valparaiso, before setting foot on a Pacific island (9 August 1837, 20 [8]). Once he was actually in New Zealand, Fr Petit-Jean echoed the Bishop’s comments.

When I see a New Zealander abandon the ferocity of his character and prove that he was once a cannibal, a man-eater, I admire and bless the power of divine grace that works such great changes in them every day. (9 August 1841, 107 [7])

One must not forget that they were cannibals but ten years ago. Children of 14 or 15 have almost all been treated to human flesh by their parents. It was not too long ago that the house of Rewa, the great chief of Kororareka, was surrounded by posts surmounted with human heads. (11 December 1841, 118 [6])

Fr Forest added another popular aspect of the cannibal legend:

I admired the change our holy religion had wrought in this poor people who, some time ago, used to roast and eat all foreigners who had the misfortune to be shipwrecked on their shores. (26 March 1843, 247 [8])

Fr Tripe in Akaroa wrote of the Māori of Bank's Peninsula:

One must hope that they cast off this ferocious and cannibal character they still have today as soon as they begin to listen to the voice of the Gospel. (23 November 1840, 79 [10])

Pezant proved that the stereotypes died hard:

These peoples are not savages today; they farm our countryside with the childishness of a half-civilised people. However they will tell you in an indifferent tone of eating human flesh. This clearly reveals their past barbarity. They were cannibals just five or six years ago; almost all of them alive today have taken part in these horrible feasts. (7 May 1842, 147 [9])

The Marists may have been unaware that the Musket Wars of the 1820s and early 1830s were an anomaly in Māori history. The unprecedented scale of killing, and perhaps of cannibalism, brought about by new weaponry lasted until exhaustion, stalemate and new European diseases weakened the population. The missionaries seem to have thought that such slaughter was a constant of Māori society until Christianity began to take hold. They also believed like their Protestant counterparts that Christianity had brought about an end to cannibalism (Newman 2010), although rapid population decline was doubtless a contributing factor.

When cannibalism was in the foreground the stereotypes took over, but when it occupied the background to a story, it reads with much greater authenticity. Like the Ongare raid that discomfited the Protestants, two other incidents reported by the Marists involved cannibalism in a minor way. On each occasion the missionary was transcribing notes from his travel journal in a letter rather than shaping his writing for his audience back home. Here

they did not bother with the stereotypes of cannibalism. The first incident took place in Maketū, where Borjon had lived until he was transferred to Wellington and died at sea on the way there. Fr Forest recounted the following episode in which *kai tangata* was secondary to *tapu* in the story:

In the evening we arrived in a place called Maketou. Many natives are there. It was the mission of the unfortunate Fr Borjon. We asked for his house but were told that we could not sleep there because it was *tabou*, that two men recently killed in a war were cooked in that house, that the murderer still lived there. But we, not afraid of the *tabou* or the murderer, went in search of it.... The murderer who lived there welcomed us and made beautiful speeches to exonerate himself. He is a big man who has, I believe, swallowed a good number of morsels of human flesh. He has three wives. He gave us one of the rooms of the house. There we were able to sleep tranquilly on some fern all night. (26 March 1843, 247 [26])

In the second incident, Fr Baty, walking near Lake Waikaremoana with a group of Māori from Hawke's Bay, came across "an umu (sort of oven for cooking food) whose stones were still well laid out; my companions told me without hesitation: that is an umu tangata (oven where one cooks people)" (18 January 1843, 232 [18]). Again, this is an isolated statement, something observed during travels; no sensational details follow. Neither is there any reason from the tone of the letter to think that the Catholic Māori accompanying him would feel any need to delude their priest. They do not even seem to have told him who had used the oven, yet could have discredited Protestant Māori if such had been their aim. Baty had already reflected on how his journey was one of peace compared to many previous journeys of war his companions had made along the same path. After seeing the *umu tangata*, he returned to those thoughts, making an intriguing link between ritual cannibalism and Communion as he carried with him "bread and wine to make the sacred victim's blood flow in these places where human blood once flowed" (18 January 1843, 232 [18]).⁵

Such recounting of events in which cannibalism was an aside are often more convincing than sensationalist descriptions in which the practice was the central focus. This is because the priest did not feel a need to prove that cannibalism existed, or to convince his reader that it must be condemned. He simply accepted it as a fact.

* * *

Ian Barber, responding to Arens' (1979) concerns about the reliability of documentation of cannibalism, has undertaken a substantial review of early European reports of contact with Māori. He concludes that in "the published 1769-1815 documentation, not one eye-witness account of anthropophagy in an authentic Maori situation survives, in spite of intense European interest in the subject" (Barber 1992: 281). There is nevertheless, Barber argues, too much consistent evidence from a variety of sources for it all to be rejected as mere hearsay. The correspondence of the Marists, while similarly containing no eyewitness descriptions of cannibalism, supports Barber's conclusion, already quoted earlier in this article, that "a compelling case emerges for the occasional practice of cannibalism" (p. 280). Barber refers to late 18th-century Māori society, while the Marists lived among mid-19th century Māori after the exceptional violence of the Musket Wars.

As one confronts the contrast of a more restrained interpretation of cannibalism and the assumptions of a number of the cultural scenarios considered earlier, one must consider that 19th-century descriptions of New Zealand warfare have created a distorted, popular image of pre-European Maori violence, and even influenced scholarly interpretation. (p. 282)

This article, in presenting all references to cannibalism discovered in the pioneer Marists' letters from New Zealand, undoubtedly has examples of what Obeyesekere calls "cannibal talk". However, the letters contain a core that is difficult to dismiss, especially when cannibalism is a detail of secondary nature in the missionaries' letters. The Marists provided independent confirmation of cannibalism after the 1842 Ongare raid. They learned from Māori that eating important prisoners of war increased a chief's *mana*. They learned that the practice did not transform people into devilish red-eyed savages. Māori in many different areas, even inland where there was little European contact, told them about the ritual eating of a high-ranking enemy captured in battle. The Ongare raid, the *umu tangata* that Baty saw in the bush and other passages suggest that a prisoner or prisoners were sacrificed and eaten soon after battle rather than being fattened up for later consumption. The Marist letters do not support claims of cannibalism as a food source or of the fattening-up of slaves for later consumption. Even if there was an incident in which many people were eaten after a large battle, it is likely to have been a rare and perhaps unique event linked to the Musket Wars, and certainly not a cultural constant of Māori society. It may be that in a changing Māori society, cannibalism briefly became common during the Musket Wars, and then faded away in the uncertainty and pressures of European settlement as well as population loss through disease and war.

Most of all, the Marists learned that *kai tangata* was merely a cultural practice, not the defining point of difference between Europeans and non-Europeans. *Kai tangata* was much less important to the Marists than other Māori cultural practices like *tangi* ‘mourning rituals’, *waiata* ‘songs’, *tā moko* ‘tattoo’ and *whaikōrero* ‘oratory’. Cannibalism was not the central focus, the obsessional fantasy that “the Other is going to eat us” (Obeyesekere 2005: 14). Two dozen references to cannibalism in 2000 pages of correspondence is hardly an obsession. This quantitative conclusion contrasts sharply with the views of Arens and Obeyesekere, who accord cannibalism an immense place in cultural encounter between Europeans and non-Europeans during Europe’s age of expansion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Editor of *JPS* and the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and insightful comments. Any remaining shortcomings are mine.

NOTES

1. For an excellent example of how a legend can be created over time, see the study by Masonen (2000) of how the story arose that the Normans were trading in West Africa from 1364; see also Jennings (2008) on the supposed Gonneville expedition to Terra Australis in 1504-05, a voyage complete with Brazilian cannibals.
2. In 1868 the Catholic mission owned just 59 acres in the central North Island. The Rangiaowhia station had 39 acres while nine other stations shared the remaining 20 acres (Piper 2005: 25).
3. All quotes from the Marists’ correspondence are referenced by date then document and paragraph number established by Girard. Thus “303 [2]” is paragraph 2 of document 303 in Girard (2009). All translations are mine. English translations of many of the letters in Girard (2009) are available at ‘Girard contents’ at www.mariststudies.org.
4. Obeyesekere (2005: 36) discussed incidents in which the British attempted to prove Māori were cannibals by offering them human flesh, thereby allowing Māori to assume the British were cannibals.
5. Moon suggested the ritual of the Eucharist enabled Māori to transform the ritual of cannibalism (i.e., acquiring the *mana* of the person they were eating) into a form that Pākehā found acceptable (2008: 186-87).

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ABSTRACT

French Marist missionaries working in New Zealand from 1838 sometimes mentioned Māori cannibalism in their correspondence. This article finds that the Marists considered cannibalism to be a cultural practice of minor interest, not a defining point of difference between Māori and Europeans. The article also finds some evidence of ritual cannibalism, but not of mass battlefield cannibalism or of the eating of people for food.

Keywords: Cannibalism, New Zealand Māori, Marists (Society of Mary)

