

# SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

## On Cannibals

**Francis B. Nyamnjoh.** *Eating and Being Eaten: Cannibalism as Food for Thought*. Bamenda: Langaa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2018. 346 pp. Foreword by Harri Englund. Endnotes. References. Index. \$33.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-9956-550-96-8.

**Jared Staller.** *Converging on Cannibals: Terrors of Slaving in Atlantic Africa, 1509–1670*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019. 256 pp. List of Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8214-2353-0.

Work on cannibalism has consistently been cast as titillating, so it is not surprising that both Francis Nyamnjoh and Jared Staller resort, as nineteenth-century women novelists often did, to framing their work by justifying their interest in their subject matter. Staller states that it is important to deal with a topic that many still consider trivial precisely because “accusations of cannibalism also mattered and matter still to Africans.” He asserts that “Western scholars must engage the myth of cannibalism because the enduring presence of cannibalism in local witchcraft beliefs and oral traditions dictates that any authentically local history consider it” (6). Staller’s book *Converging on Cannibals* tackles the stories about cannibals that Africans and Europeans produced because so doing sheds light on a central story that facilitated slaving and justified the acquisition of enslaved Africans as property. Nyamnjoh, by contrast, states that cannibalism allows scholars to “enrich our understanding of Western modernity, by thinking of it as underpinned by a quest for superiority and supremacy through the cannibalisation of the non-Western ‘Other’” (2). In *Eating and Being Eaten*, Nyamnjoh finds indications of cannibalism throughout history in the form of enslavement and extractive colonialism, as Staller does as well. Nyamnjoh departs from Staller by also finding evidence of our cannibalistic present in the shape “of sweatshop labour extractive capitalism,” repressive policing, and “the opportunistic trafficking ... of those reduced to the indignities of life as human waste and as wasted

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humanity by Western modernity and its chainsaws of Frankenstein industrialisation, commodification, globalisation and trivialisation” (2). Perhaps as a result of the work by Staller and Nyamnjoh here, future scholars will no longer feel as if they need to explain why this subject remains worthy of investigation.

Staller’s two main interests in *Converging on Cannibals* are the Jaga, a “fictional amalgamation” which Africans and Europeans co-produced about mobile warrior *kilombo* communities known collectively as Imbangala, and the idea that scholars should return to the primary sources that deal with the Jaga/Imbangala (48). Ideas about the Jaga can be traced to Africans’ fears of being captured and eaten by Europeans or forced onto slave ships, pieces of European legal codes that regulated just war, attempts by the royal rulers who followed Afonso I of Kongo to reclaim his heritage, and biblical redemption stories. Staller’s narrative unfolds over seven chronological chapters. Dealing with the years between roughly 1483 and 1670, the book begins with the rule of Alfonso I of Kongo and his self-proclaimed Catholic kingship. The next chapter moves to 1568 to consider the appearance and circulation of stories about the Jaga, a term which, Staller suggests, became a useful misunderstanding which allowed interactions and interference in affairs economic and political—particularly those related to slaving. Staller then discusses the use of cannibalism by Imbangala groups in the area inland from Luanda. Their “infrastructural innovation” was “their mobile military unit as a framework for sustained depredation” (79). Staller explains how the Imbangala dealt with the problem of increasingly fractured communities by invoking systematic, terrorizing violence—including the forced recruitment of child soldiers, theft of resources, infanticide, and threats of cannibalism. The last chapters of the book take an almost prosopographical approach. Staller examines the reign of Queen Njinga of Matamba, who “deployed cannibalism as a tactic to instill fear and gain political power” in Angola (13).

Staller’s last main chapter considers reports of the Jaga by European observers such as Andrew Battell and his heavy-handed interlocutor and editor Samuel Purchas. Battell’s account was recorded between 1607 and 1611, after his return to England, and published posthumously in a way that over the course of several editions came to represent Battell as sole author and the Jaga as a single polity. Staller advocates for renewed attention to the primary sources on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Kongo, because reading them closely illuminates how editors like Purchas used Battell to produce descriptions of the Jaga that Staller reads as evidence of disintegrating communities in crisis. Purchas, who missed this historical phenomenon, instead used rumors of Jaga invaders and their alleged cannibalism to bring order to the chaos of evolving religious worlds.

One of Staller’s major contributions is to continue to push scholars’ thinking about what made Angola “Atlantic” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Part of what characterizes this story as an Atlantic one is the way that Staller draws connections to events occurring elsewhere around the ocean. By reading the proliferation of accounts about the Jaga in the context of the death of King Sebastião of Portugal, the revolt of Amador on São Tomé Island in 1595, the English defeat of the Spanish Armada, and a

spate of witchcraft accusations in France, Germany, and Scotland, Staller adds to what Atlanticists might say about networks of kinship, religion, slaving, and trade. It was not coincidental, Staller observes, that the Jaga story emerged and flourished as it had “in many colonial spaces where Europeans sought to control” the environment and the humans who inhabited it (7). The uncertainty that Staller shows fueled the rise of the Imbangala, along with the disintegration and reformation of new groups that occurred in the shadow of imperialism, are themes that dovetail with current scholarship on ethnogenesis and shatter zones in the Atlantic World.<sup>1</sup>

Staller’s discussion of the Imbangala as a mobile group echoes another evolving idea in Atlantic history, and it also illustrates one of the tensions between Atlantic and Native American history, as it might for Atlantic and African history. Staller echoes a growing body of work about Native Americans who exercised power in North America by moving. Some of this scholarship, such as that on the use of snowshoes by the Abenakis, could be considered Atlantic. Other work, like that on the Comanche empire, emerged in the midst of a debate about tensions between Atlantic and Native American history, and characterizes this use of power as explicitly imperial in nature, although these Native American empires were unconventional ones not built around expanding states.<sup>2</sup> This latter work was focused on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, so it is interesting to see Staller’s treatment of a similar idea in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Angola.

The context that Staller provides helps readers to see this milieu of uncertainty and disorder reflected in a “litany of troubles” in west-central Africa (85). Staller describes a “plague of witches” beginning with the reign of Afonso I of Kongo, which cast insiders as witches when they overtly appropriated foreign peoples, ideas, and trade goods (19). Later generations who lived through an increase in this tumult added accusations of cannibalism to accusations of witchcraft. By the late 1560s, communities were so splintered that it became impossible to find an “evil within,” and external cannibals—the Jaga—provided a convenient group against which to levy charges of evil (44).

Discussions of witchcraft also materialize in Francis Nyamnjoh’s edited volume. Nyamnjoh explains that reports of real and imagined cannibalism were rife during the colonial period, but the postcolonial context was likelier to offer accusations of witchcraft and occult practices. Obviously, the volume’s subject matter is more expansive than witchcraft. *Eating and Being Eaten* includes an extensive introduction by Nyamnjoh, along with chapters on the writing of anthropological ethnographies as cannibalism; the cannibalistic incorporation of Zimbabwe into a neo-imperial, postcolonial world; the ways that colonial Christianity cannibalized Bamenda Grassfielders in Cameroon; how black middle-class South Africans are pressured to cannibalistically sacrifice family and extended relations in order to climb the social ladder; the funerary practices in post-apartheid South Africa that cannibalize people into consumer capitalist society, rather than nourishing communities-in-mourning as a whole; a reading of a South African lap-dancing venue as a site where women’s bodies are prepared and consumed in ways that in turn

encourage women's consumption of the money and social opportunities that customers offer; a rumination on the figurative "Enlightened Man," his cannibalistic nature and culture, and his projection of his cannibalism onto other people to underscore the extractive policies, strategies, and endeavors that operated during the period of enslavement and colonialism in Africa; and a chapter on cannibalism in Japan and its link between the Japanese sex industry, the pop scene, and suicide.

This connection between witchcraft and cannibalism and different chronologies dependent on place as well as time suggest that both Nyamnjoh and Staller are interested in considering definitions of cannibalism. For Staller, cannibalism—as opposed to anthropophagy—refers only “to discourses, practices, symbols, or rituals that invoke the taboo of flesh-eating, regardless of whether or not they involved ingesting human flesh” (10). But whereas Staller is most interested in a bounded definition that distinguishes cannibalism from anthropophagy and that links cannibalism with witchcraft, Nyamnjoh has urged authors to expand the concept of cannibalism by applying it in as many interpretations as possible. He decries the tendency thus far to define cannibalism too narrowly, and to focus on how charges of cannibalism were levied against others rather than to reflect on our own cannibalistic tendencies. He calls upon scholars to think about cannibalism while curbing their own preconceived notions about modernity, and while interpreting those notions as “a disguised form of cannibalism” (1).

Many of the authors in *Eating and Being Eaten* take up Nyamnjoh's call for a broad analytical application of cannibalism. Artwell Nhemachena and Maria Kaundjua do so in their discussion of sanctions and witchcraft in contemporary Zimbabwe, casting European imperialists as cannibals who camouflaged their “imperial pretences to help ‘civilise,’ ‘develop’ and ‘save’ Africans” with “good and godly intentions” (130). European- and American-imposed sanctions against Zimbabwe, they argue, were intended to “(re-)incorporate and cannibalise Zimbabwe into the world system” that was undemocratically controlled by the sanction-imposing countries (145). They touch on linkages between “associations of cannibalism with witchcraft in Zimbabwean epistemologies and ontologies,” and argue that neo-imperial attempts to incorporate Africa constitute a logic of cannibalistic witchcraft cloaked in discourses of “ethics of vulnerability” and “ethics of care” (129).

Walter Gam Nkwi's chapter considers one aspect of imperialism—Christianity—to conclude that Christianity cannibalized Christian Bamenda Grassfielders by curbing the power of traditional rulers and introducing new ideas about love and sex via baptism and the sacraments. Ayanda Manqoyi, writing on post-apartheid South Africa, sees cannibalism as a metaphor “to understand the ideological relations of individuals and societies to development and modernity” (202). For many of the authors in Nyamnjoh's volume, then, cannibalism is viewed as a historical development rather than as an act identifiable with specific people.

Though many of the authors in *Eating and Being Eaten* take up Nyamnjoh's invitation to consider cannibalism broadly conceived, most of them continue to see cannibalism as a negative deed. Nyamnjoh's introduction “invites the

reader to critically interrogate presuppositions that proliferate around cannibalism as an essentially negative indulgence and practice that diminishes the humanity of both the eater and the eaten” (1). Nyamnjoh asks authors to ponder whether there is room to consider cannibalism as empowering.

Dominique Santos is one of the few authors in this collection who follows this interpretive line. Her engaging chapter explains how the bodies of lap dancers are cannibalized by “industrial-consumer capitalism’s” extraction of energy while also showing how lapdancers who were thus “eaten” could also “maximise their potential to eat” (255, 257). Where Santos succeeds in finding a degree of agency in cannibalism, it is interesting that so many of the other authors see cannibalism in other “-isms.” The opening up of Africa by European colonizers, along with neoliberalism, capitalism, and global consumerism, can all be considered forms of cannibalism. This interpretive tendency did raise two questions for this historian: whether such a broad understanding of cannibalism runs the risk of eliding the people who practiced and were consumed by it, and whether such an attack on developments associated with Western modernity risks understating the growing body of scholarship on non-Western and multiple modernities.

Matters of definition aside, these books by Staller and Nyamnjoh provide useful methodological guidance on ways to research and write about cannibalism. Several authors in *Eating and Being Eaten* model and sometimes explicitly discuss their disciplinary methods. Andreas Buhler critiques ethnographers who write in the present tense because such an approach has the tendency to freeze the people written about in time. Buhler observes that anthropology has evolved as a discipline to focus more on local representations and knowledge, to critique approaches that violently exploited anthropologists’ subjects, and to work to find ways to make research “beneficial to all parties involved” (121). Dominique Santos’s reflection on research in a lap-dancing club demonstrates how researchers can be “embroiled in the cannibalism” taking place in the communities they study, observing, “I will eat the stories and observations of life here to write part of a PhD” (275). At a minimum, these essays will provoke introspection about the stakes of studying a behavior that has too often been projected onto an external other.

Staller has produced a work that is pleasingly transparent about method, and reflective in ways that are useful to historians about how the approaches of writers to using primary sources have changed over time. Staller’s discussion of historiography charts the work by a group of “pioneers,” a first generation of scholars in “the modern study of Angola, from roughly 1960 to 1990,” who “were entirely skeptical about narrating authentically African history while relying on sources written by Europeans” (4). As a result, this first generation recorded oral traditions while in Angola during the Angolan civil war, and it was these traditions that informed the histories they wrote. Staller sees himself as part of a second wave, attempting to interrogate stories about the Jaga with a new set of questions about who produced them.

Staller encourages readers to return to original texts about Kongo, Ndongo, and Matamba for several reasons. First, because they will uncover

differences between the originals and their translations. Second, because of significant variations across multiple editions of a single text. Historians and literary scholars who wish to use Andrew Battell's text, for example, will need to consult Staller's precise discussion of how Purchas amended *Purchas His Pilgrimage* between 1613 and 1617, eventually singling out the Imbangala as a separate entity, emphasizing their supposed barbarities, and representing them as a cohesive group rather than as various separate communities employing one shared historical strategy of mobility. Given Staller's interest in primary sources, it would have been interesting to see more discussion of the ways that accusations of and stories about witches and cannibals appeared in Portuguese, Spanish, and English, and whether these varied. Historians know that many accused witches in Salem and elsewhere in New England were women, and it might have been productive to think about how authors writing in Spanish—a language that elides gender by describing mixed groups of people with a masculine pronoun—characterized groups of witches and cannibals in the regions of interest to Staller. The fact that Staller does not consider this question should not negate the value of his contribution. There are other useful additions to his publication as well, such as the inclusion of long primary source excerpts, including letters from Afonso I of Kongo, which should be of use to future researchers (194–210).

Taken together, these books belong to the same wave of scholarship, different analytical approaches notwithstanding. Nyamnjoh and Staller are both less interested in establishing whether anthropophagy took place, and more concerned with determining why stories about cannibalism continue to fascinate readers. They offer a provocative reexamination of a subject that should serve historians and anthropologists well, whether they are interested in Africa, the Americas, or the cannibals within us.

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## Notes

1. James Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra. 2011. "Mapping Ethnogenesis in the Early Modern Atlantic." *William and Mary Quarterly* 68 (2): 181–208; Robbie Ethridge and Sheri M. Shuck-Hall, eds. 2009. *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
2. Thomas M. Wickman. 2018. *Snowshoe Country: An Environmental and Cultural History of Winter in the Early American Northeast*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Pekka Hämäläinen. 2013. "What's in a Concept? The Kinetic Empire of the Comanches." *History and Theory* 52 (1): 81–90; Juliana Barr. 2012. "The Red Continent and the Cant of the Coastline." *William and Mary Quarterly* 69 (3): 521–26.