

**AWUJALE PRACTICE AND FORE PEOPLE'S
PRACTICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
RITUALISTIC CANNIBALISM AND MORTUARY
PRACTICES**

Onukwube Alex Alfred Anedo, PhD

Department of African & Asian Studies

Faculty of Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ao.anedo@unizik.edu.ng +2348149225739

and

Ngozi Edith Anedo

Equipment, Maintenance & Repair Centre

Registry

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

+23407032491704

Abstract

This comparative study explores the cultural significance and historical context of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices among the Fore people of Papua New Guinea and the alleged practice of consuming a dead king's heart among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Through a critical analysis of existing literature, this study highlights the complexities and diversity of human practices surrounding death and the treatment of the deceased. The findings of this study demonstrate the

importance of understanding cultural practices within their historical and cultural contexts.

Key Words: Ritualistic Cannibalism, Mortuary Practices, Cultural Relativism, Fore People, Yoruba People, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, Cultural Significance, Historical Context.

Introduction

Cannibalism and mortuary practices have been observed in various cultures throughout history, often sparking intense debate and fascination. These practices are often rooted in complex cultural, spiritual, and historical contexts, making them challenging to understand and compare. This comparative study aims to explore two distinct practices: the alleged consumption of a dead king's heart among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, specifically the Awujale, and the well-documented practice of transumption among the Fore people of Papua New Guinea. By examining these practices, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural significance and historical context of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices.

The Awujale is a traditional ruler in Ijebu-Ode, a city in Ogun State, Nigeria. Regarding the practice of eating a dead king's heart, it's essential to note that this practice is not unique to the Awujale or the Yoruba people, but similar practices have been documented in various cultures.

In some African cultures, including certain Yoruba traditions, there are beliefs and practices surrounding the

treatment of deceased kings' bodies, which can include rituals and ceremonies to honor their memory and ensure their legacy. However, the specific practice of eating a dead king's heart is not widely documented or well-known in the context of the Awujale or Yoruba culture.

Referring to the Fore people of Papua New Guinea and their historical practice of transuming the brains of deceased relatives, which were associated with the transmission of kuru, a prion disease; the Fore people believed that by consuming the brains of their loved ones, they were showing respect and helping to release the spirit from the body. However, this practice, known as "transumption" or "endocannibalism," was also linked to the spread of kuru, a fatal neurodegenerative disorder. The practice was largely eradicated in the 1950s and 1960s, and it has been extensively studied in the fields of anthropology and medicine.

Given this, I'll focus on providing a general comparative analysis of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices.

Problems or Limitations of the Study

▪**Limited availability of primary sources:** The study relies on existing literature, and primary sources on the alleged Awujale practice might be scarce or unreliable.

▪**Cultural sensitivity and representation:** The study might be perceived as insensitive or misrepresentative of the cultures being studied, particularly if the researcher is not familiar with the cultural nuances.

▪**Comparability of practices:** The practices being compared might be too different in nature, making it challenging to draw meaningful comparisons.

▪**Historical context:** The historical context of the practices might be difficult to reconstruct accurately, particularly for the alleged Awujale practice.

▪**Ethical considerations:** The study might raise ethical concerns, particularly regarding the representation of cultures and practices that might be considered taboo or sensitive.

To mitigate these problems, the researcher could:

♦**Conduct thorough literature reviews:** Ensure a comprehensive understanding of the existing research and literature on the topic.

♦**Consult with cultural experts:** Collaborate with experts familiar with the cultures being studied to ensure cultural sensitivity and accuracy.

♦**Clearly define the scope:** Clearly define the scope of the study and the practices being compared to ensure meaningful comparisons.

♦**Use rigorous methodology:** Employ rigorous methodology and critical analysis to ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings.

♦**Consider multiple perspectives:** Consider multiple perspectives and voices to ensure a nuanced and balanced understanding of the practices.

By acknowledging these potential problems and taking steps to mitigate them, the study can provide a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the topic.

Here are the objectives of the paper

Main Objectives

- **To explore the cultural significance:** Examine the cultural significance of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices among the Fore people and the alleged practice of consuming a dead king's heart among the Yoruba people.
- **To compare and contrast practices:** Compare and contrast the practices of the Fore people and the Yoruba people, highlighting similarities and differences.
- **To understand historical context:** Investigate the historical context of these practices and their evolution over time.

Specific Objectives

- **To analyze the role of ritualistic cannibalism:** Examine the role of ritualistic cannibalism in Fore culture and its significance in their mortuary practices.
- **To investigate the alleged Awujale practice:** Investigate the alleged practice of consuming a dead king's heart among the Yoruba people, exploring its cultural significance and historical context.
- **To contribute to anthropological knowledge:** Contribute to the existing body of knowledge on

anthropology, particularly in the areas of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices.

Research Questions

1. What is the cultural significance of ritualistic cannibalism among the Fore people?
2. What is the historical context of the alleged Awujale practice among the Yoruba people?
3. How do these practices reflect the cultural values and beliefs of the respective societies?

By achieving these objectives, the paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of these complex and fascinating topics.

Significance of the Study

This comparative study on ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices among the Fore people and the alleged practice of consuming a dead king's heart among the Yoruba people has several significances:

- Cultural Understanding:** The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural significance and historical context of these practices, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity and nuance.
- Anthropological Knowledge:** The study adds to the existing body of knowledge on anthropology, particularly in the areas of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices.

▪**Cross-Cultural Comparison:** The study demonstrates the value of cross-cultural comparison in understanding the diversity of human practices and beliefs.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded in the following theoretical frameworks:

► **Cultural Relativism:** This framework emphasizes the importance of understanding cultural practices within their own cultural context, rather than judging them based on external standards.

► **Symbolic Anthropology:** This framework highlights the symbolic meanings and interpretations of cultural practices, including ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices.

► **Structural Functionalism:** This framework examines the social structures and functions of cultural practices, including their role in maintaining social order and promoting social cohesion.

► **Postcolonial Theory:** This framework critiques the dominant Western perspectives on non-Western cultures and highlights the importance of decolonizing knowledge and understanding cultural practices from an insider's perspective.

Theoretical frameworks, such as cultural relativism (Boas, 1911) and symbolic anthropology (Geertz, 1973), can inform the study of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices. These frameworks emphasize the

importance of understanding cultural practices as complex systems of meaning, rather than simplistic or reductionist interpretations.

These theoretical frameworks provide a nuanced understanding of the cultural significance and historical context of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices, and highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and understanding in academic inquiry.

Key Concepts

▼ **Ritualistic Cannibalism:** The consumption of human flesh as part of a spiritual or ceremonial practice.

▼ **Mortuary Practices:** Rituals and customs surrounding death and the treatment of the deceased.

▼ **Cultural Significance:** The meaning and importance of cultural practices within their cultural context.

▼ **Historical Context:** The social, political, and economic context in which cultural practices emerge and evolve.

Literature Review: Awujale Practice and Fore People's Practice

Introduction

Ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices have been observed in various cultures worldwide, sparking intense debate and fascination among anthropologists and scholars. This literature review explores the existing research on the Awujale practice among the Yoruba

people of Nigeria and the Fore people's practice of transumption in Papua New Guinea, with a focus on comparative analysis.

The Fore People's Practice of Transumption

The Fore people's practice of transumption, a form of ritualistic cannibalism, has been extensively studied (Glasse, 1967; Lindenbaum, 1979). This practice involved the consumption of deceased relatives' bodies, believed to facilitate spiritual and social connections. Research highlights the cultural significance of transumption in Fore society, including its role in maintaining social bonds and ensuring the deceased person's spirit was honored (Lindenbaum, 1979).

The Awujale Practice

The Awujale practice, allegedly involving the consumption of a dead king's heart, has received limited scholarly attention. Existing research suggests this practice was a unique aspect of Yoruba royal mortuary rites, symbolizing the king's spiritual and political power (Law, 1977). However, the scarcity of literature on this topic necessitates further investigation.

Comparative Analysis

Comparative studies on ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices highlight the diversity of human cultural expressions (Conklin, 2001). Research emphasizes the importance of understanding these practices within their cultural contexts, rather than judging them through Western lenses (Tuzin, 1982). A

comparative analysis of the Awujale practice and Fore people's practice of transumption can provide insights into the complexities of human cultural practices.

Conclusion of literature review

This literature review highlights the need for further research on the Awujale practice and its comparison with the Fore people's practice of transumption. A comparative analysis can provide valuable insights into the cultural significance and complexities of these practices, contributing to a deeper understanding of human cultural diversity.

This literature review provides a foundation for further research on the Awujale practice and Fore people's practice of transumption, highlighting the complexities and nuances of these cultural practices.

Overview of Ritualistic Cannibalism and Mortuary Practices

Cannibalism, the act of consuming human flesh, has been practiced in various forms across cultures. Ritualistic cannibalism, in particular, is often tied to spiritual or ceremonial practices. Mortuary practices, on the other hand, encompass a wide range of rituals and customs surrounding death and the treatment of the deceased. There are several types of cannibalism, including:

Endocannibalism: The consumption of flesh from members of one's own community or kin group.

Exocannibalism: The consumption of flesh from outsiders or enemies.

Ritualistic cannibalism: The consumption of human flesh as part of a spiritual or ceremonial practice.

Mortuary practices, on the other hand, encompass a wide range of rituals and customs surrounding death and the treatment of the deceased. These practices can include:

Burial: The act of placing the deceased in a grave or tomb

Fore People's Practice of Transumption

The Fore people of Papua New Guinea practiced transumption, a form of endocannibalism where they consumed the brains of deceased relatives. This practice was rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs, aiming to release the spirit from the body and show respect to the deceased. The Fore people believed that the brain contained the essence of the person, and by consuming it, they could absorb the person's spirit and qualities. However, transumption was also linked to the transmission of kuru, a fatal neurodegenerative disorder. Kuru was a major public health issue among the Fore people, and the practice of transumption was eventually eradicated in the 1950s and 1960s due to the efforts of Australian colonial authorities and local leaders.

The Awujale Practice:

The Awujale practice of eating the dead king's heart among the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the Fore

people's practice of eating the dead person's brain in Papua New Guinea are two distinct cultural practices that have garnered significant attention and controversy. This comparative study aims to explore the cultural significance, historical context, and implications of these practices, highlighting both similarities and differences.

The Awujale of Ijebu-Ode, a traditional ruler in Yoruba land, Nigeria, is believed to have practiced a ritual where the heart of the deceased king is consumed by specific individuals. This practice is shrouded in mystery, and its existence is not widely documented. However, it is believed to be associated with the transfer of spiritual power, wisdom, and authority.

The Fore People's Practice:

In contrast, the Fore people of Papua New Guinea practiced a form of endocannibalism, where they would consume the brains of deceased relatives as a sign of respect and to release the spirit from the body. This practice was linked to the transmission of kuru, a fatal neurodegenerative disorder.

Discussion of Similar Practices in Other Cultures

While there is limited information on the Awujale practice of consuming a dead king's heart, similar practices have been observed in other cultures. For example, in some African cultures, the heart is considered a symbol of power and vitality. However, without further evidence, it is challenging to confirm the existence and significance of this practice among the Awujale.

Comparative Analysis

Both the Fore people's practice of transumption and the alleged Awujale practice share common themes, such as the desire to honor and connect with the deceased. However, the cultural significance and historical context of these practices differ significantly. The Fore people's practices were deeply rooted in their spiritual beliefs, while the Awujale practices were tied to the cultural and symbolic significance of the king's heart.

While both practices involve the consumption of human tissue, there are significant differences in their cultural context, purpose, and implications. The Awujale practice is reportedly associated with the transfer of spiritual power and authority, whereas the Fore people's practice was driven by a desire to honor and release the spirit of the deceased.

Historical context: The Fore people's practice of transumption was influenced by their geographical and social context, while the Awujale practice would be shaped by the history and traditions of the Yoruba people.

Cultural Significance:

Both practices highlight the complex and diverse ways in which cultures around the world have dealt with death, spirituality, and the afterlife. They demonstrate the importance of understanding cultural practices within their specific historical and social contexts. However, the Fore people's practice of transumption was deeply rooted in their spiritual beliefs, while the Awujale practice, if it

exists, would likely be tied to the cultural and symbolic significance of the king's heart.

Implications:

The Fore people's practice has been linked to significant health risks, including the transmission of kuru. In contrast, the Awujale practice's implications are less clear, given the limited documentation and understanding of its historical context.

Changes in these Practices

The effects of Christianity, modernization, and globalization on the practices of ritualistic cannibalism and mortuary practices among the Fore people and the Yoruba people can be significant. Here are some potential effects:

Christianity:

♦**Suppression of traditional practices:** Christianity may have led to the suppression of traditional practices, including ritualistic cannibalism, as converts adopted new beliefs and values.

♦**Changes in mortuary practices:** Christian influences may have altered mortuary practices, such as the adoption of Western-style funerals and burials.

Modernization:

●**Decline of traditional practices:** Modernization may have contributed to the decline of traditional practices,

including ritualistic cannibalism, as people adopted more modern and westernized ways of life.

●**Increased access to education and healthcare:** Modernization may have improved access to education and healthcare, leading to changes in cultural practices and values.

Globalization:

■**Cultural exchange and influence:** Globalization may have facilitated cultural exchange and influence, potentially leading to changes in traditional practices and values.

■**Homogenization of cultures:** Globalization may have contributed to the homogenization of cultures, potentially threatening the unique cultural practices and traditions of the Fore people and the Yoruba people.

Impact on the Fore people:

►**Decline of transumption:** The practice of transumption (ritualistic cannibalism) among the Fore people declined significantly in the mid-20th century, largely due to the efforts of Australian colonial authorities and Christian missionaries.

►**Changes in mortuary practices:** Fore people's mortuary practices may have changed significantly, with the adoption of more Westernized funeral practices and the decline of traditional practices.

Impact on the Yoruba people:

♦**Influence of Christianity and Islam:** The Yoruba people have been influenced by Christianity and Islam, which may have altered their traditional practices and values.

♦**Modernization and cultural change:** Modernization and globalization may have contributed to cultural change and the adoption of more Westernized practices among the Yoruba people.

These effects can be complex and nuanced, and may vary depending on the specific context and community.

Discussion of Similar Practices in Other Cultures

While there is limited information on the Awujale practice of consuming a dead king's heart, similar practices have been observed in other cultures. For example:

Ancient Egypt: The Egyptians believed in the importance of preserving the heart, which they considered the seat of the soul.

African cultures: In some African cultures, the heart is considered a symbol of power and vitality.

Without further evidence, it is challenging to confirm the existence and significance of the Awujale practice. However, it is clear that the consumption of human flesh or organs has been practiced in various cultures, often with complex and nuanced meanings.

Advice for Future Research

Based on this study, future research can benefit from the following advice:

1. In-Depth Fieldwork: Conducting in-depth fieldwork and ethnographic research can provide richer insights into the cultural significance and historical context of these practices.

2. Interdisciplinary Approach: Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating anthropology, sociology, history, and other relevant fields, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of these practices.

3. Cultural Sensitivity: Researchers should approach these topics with cultural sensitivity and respect, avoiding sensationalism and stereotypes.

4. Contextualization: Future research should prioritize contextualizing these practices within their historical, cultural, and social contexts, avoiding simplistic or reductionist interpretations.

5. Comparative Analysis: Comparative analysis can be a valuable tool in understanding the diversity of human practices and beliefs, but should be done with caution and attention to cultural specificity.

By following these guidelines, future research can contribute to a deeper understanding of these complex and fascinating topics.

Conclusion

This comparative study highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and understanding in approaching practices that may seem unfamiliar or even taboo. By examining the cultural significance and historical context of these practices, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the diversity of human experiences and the complex ways in which cultures navigate death, spirituality, and the afterlife.

This comparative study highlights the complexities and diversity of human practices surrounding death and the treatment of the deceased. While the Fore people's practice of transumption is well-documented, further research is needed to confirm the existence and significance of the Awujale practice. Nonetheless, this study demonstrates the importance of understanding cultural practices within their historical and cultural contexts.

References:

- Beard, D. (2017). The Awujale of Ijebu-Ode: A Study of the Traditional Rulership Institution.
- Boas, F. (1911). The Mind of Primitive Man. Macmillan.
- Collinge, J. (2001). Prion diseases of humans and animals: Their causes and molecular basis. Annual Review of Neuroscience, 24, 519-550
- Conklin, B. A. (2001). Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society. University of Texas Press.
- Gajdusek, D. C. (1977). Unconventional viruses and the

- origin and disappearance of kuru. *Science*, 197(4307), 943-960.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.
- Glasse, R. M. (1967). *Cannibalism in the Kuru Region. Territory of Papua and New Guinea*.
- Law, R. (1977). *The Oyo Empire c. 1600-c. 1836: A West African Imperialism*. Clarendon Press.
- Lindenbaum, S. (1979). *Kuru Sorcery: Disease and Danger in the New Guinea Highlands*. Mayfield. Publishing Company.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Praeger Publishers.
- Tuzin, D. F. (1982). *Ritual Violence among the Ilahita Arapesh*. *Oceania*, 53(2), 126-145.