

A Case of Schizophrenia Presenting with Anthropophagy

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Abstract

Background: Dismemberment of a corpse during or following a murder is a notorious occurrence, however cannibalism as a practice dates back to very remote times, mostly as a part of ritualistic events. A non-ritualistic cannibalism might entangle a diversity of psychiatric disturbances, albeit direct links are arguable and difficult to uphold in judicial proceedings.

Case report: Authors report the case of a non-ritualistic and isolated behavior of cannibalism. An Albanian male aging in his late thirties, known to his village for being antisocial and callous, with very few interpersonal links and recently returned from immigration, killed a youngster aged 15 years. After beheading the corpse, he was

found on the crime scene and arrested while cooking and consuming the viscera of the massacred body. The law enforcement officers took several pictures from the obscene place, and requested a thorough psychiatric evaluation of the perpetrator.

Conclusion: Insanity defence was raised in the case we're describing, and upheld in court. The fact that the perpetrator was diagnosed with schizophrenia only after that the criminal event took place, made the initial deliberation very difficult. Also, the extreme rarity of such a cruel act, and the natural interest of mass media and public, has rendered this event an issue of large debating.

Keywords: cannibalism, anthropophagy, schizophrenia, insanity defence, cruelty, dismemberment.

INTRODUCTION

Cannibalism and cannibalistic rituals pertain to remote and barbaric rituals, and Albanian culture has no historical references on these practices, notoriously met in quite a few isolated and non-civilized tribal areas. However, dismemberment or disfigurement of a victim while still alive or of a corpse thereafter are foreseen as aggravating elements of murder in the criminal code.

A matter of particular interest, cannibalism has been part of mythology since millennia. However, probably the most detailed descriptions have been contributions of anthropologists (1). In her exhaustive review, Lindenbaum suggests a diversity of typologies for cannibalism. Among other, she distinguishes between endocannibalism [allegedly an act of affection, as a part of funerary or mortuary consumption] and exocannibalism [an act of aggression mainly during warfare]. Furthermore, Lindenbaum typifies the medicinal cannibalism; auto-cannibalism [or autophagy]; the sacrificial cannibalism [among Aztecs as an example]; innocent cannibalism [being unaware of the kind of flesh consumed] and other subtleties of the notion (2).

The first PubMed indexed paper focusing on cannibalism dates back on 1889 and the author describes a ritualistic act of

anthropophagy [synonymous to cannibalism] (2). Among 1348 items produced from the database after a search with the keyword “cannibalism” we might easily conclude, however, that the ‘human cannibalism’ as a subtype is extremely rare, as to be systematically studied and classified. The word itself has diverged from its original meaning, and naturalistic sciences suggest that a diversity of species, even cells, might adopt cannibalistic behaviors (3).

Lester et al. have tried to approach the theme systematically, through conducting a research on thirty-one convicted cannibals (4). Their dataset was large enough to define differences between murderers engaged in cannibalism and others that were not; although the co-existence of necrophilia with cannibalism was a confounding factor in the study.

Approaching the issue of cannibalism from a hermeneutic corner is a difficult task, when considering that even anthropological reports have been blamed for doubtful veracity. Altogether the theme can be simplified in psychopathological terms, with the act ascribed to mere and individual psychotic situations, whose severity is incontestable. Nevertheless, an important bulk of data suggest that the practice is far

from being unknown to humans (5). Let alone the numerous fictional characters depicted in the literature with cannibalistic attitude and behavior, Decimus Juvenalis poeticised almost two thousand years before such a practice in some ancient tribal areas of Africa, through his verses: *“But human flesh – Oh! That is lawful fare / and you may eat it without scandal there”* (6). Titubating between the difficulties to accept the presence [even remote] of such a practice, in an ambiguity mixed up with the real complexity of proving its existence for good, we’ll find even scholars that try to deprive famous characters from their notorious merit of being cannibals. The starvation of count Ugolino and his sons may be a historical fact, but the question if Dante Alighieri’s infernal character ate his children or did not, has been largely debated with very few chances to achieve a unique and exhaustive conclusion (7).

CASE REPORT

Local police in an Albanian village had a tip, and the deputy of the area inspected initially the crime scene. Due to the horrible crime uncovered, police special forces were immediately called and the entire village was sealed off within hours.

The law enforcement team uncovered the beheaded corpse of a youngster aging approx. 15 years, and following the blood sprinkles they headed toward an isolated hut. Some minutes later the police erupted inside the hut, and found a local villager in an extreme confusional state. The perpetrator, immediately neutralized, was meanwhile vomiting fresh blood and fleshy materials. A big butcher knife was found inside the hut, and at the corner a casserole heated with wood. The materials in the casserole included the severed skull of the beheaded youngster, with tissues and biological fluids leaking abundantly around the improvised oven.

Once arrested and indicted, the State Attorney requested within few days a thorough psychiatric expertise of the perpetrator.

The criminal, an Albanian male aging in his late thirties, recently came back from a long period of migration. Due to extremely low level of education as well as his state of confusion, the psychiatrists had substantial difficulties into communicating verbally with him. However, several psychiatric sessions and interviews were performed inside a correctional facility where mentally ill criminals are under involuntary medical treatment.

The perpetrator showed initially a high level of preoccupation vis-à-vis his appearance: *'Since they arrested me... I never changed my trousers... Once I'll get back my passport, I'll be home again...'* During several interviews his posture remained unchanged; emotionally he was unresponsive, flat and amimic. Severe thought distortions were detected. During the reporting of the criminal event he has continuously intrusive confabulations, such as *'I am married... I've got three children, but I don't remember their names'*.

Paranoid and interpretative, somatic and bizarre delusions were present as well, when he said: *'My heart and mind are held tight within my right hand... I must eat cattle liver to remain young as I am...'* and again with regard to the murder: *'I killed the youngster because they've stolen my passport... his father probably did that. I killed him for I loved him so much... I cut his neck off right where it joins the head, like butchers do with animals... so they suffer the least possible... I striped his skin and cooked him, because that's what they will do with me thereafter...'* Once and again auditory hallucinations were reported.

The perpetrator was previously known to the psychiatric services of Albania, but due to the fact that he came only recently back

from migration, he was only once and for a relatively short period of time (two weeks) hospitalized in a psychiatric facility. In the village where he lived he was known as a lonely person, particularly cruel to animals, with several episodes of killing stray dogs and consuming their viscera.

The diagnosis of his previous and only hospitalization was 'organic psychosis due to drug abuse', albeit our group of experts could not collect reliable data on any abuse of importance. The diagnosis of *schizophrenia* was made, with paranoid and bizarre delusions, perceptual distortions and lack of impulse control; a psychopathology that has severely damaged his mental capacity. An insanity defence was raised in Court; it was initially upheld and the individual was admitted to a criminal psychiatric facility.

As long as the psychotic picture was strongly delineated with schizophrenic elements, strange mannerism and posture, ambivalence, as well as vivid hallucinations, it is still hard to find an environmental factor playing a certain etiological role into the critical period, especially during the murder and the beheading of the victim. Worth mentioning is that two other from his family relatives of first degree had a positive psychiatric history; but probably their

problems were of minor nature, requiring no institutionalization.

DISCUSSION

The issue of human cannibalism is so complicated and controversial, that other fields of study rather than psychiatry alone have been researching on the matter, including palaeontology and forensic archaeology (8).

However, forensic psychiatry has been witnessing an increasing number of reports, albeit mostly isolated and in disparate settings, with cannibalistic and sadistic acts raising much of horror and interest to the public; the case of Jeffrey Dahmer being probably one of the most notorious (9). In spite of the fact that Dahmer was diagnosed with a mixed personality disorder sadistic, obsessive, fetishistic, antisocial, necrophilic features and entered a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity, at the end of the judicial process he received fifteen consecutive terms of life in prison, each one for every victim he abused, tortured, mutilated and brutally killed (9). Dahmer case will obviously be not the last episode of human cannibalism to be reported, as in fact it is not even the first one to raise forensic interest in the recent years (10).

The only previous and important psychiatric feature to the case we presented above was the proven animal cruelty in several episodes prior to the cannibalistic beheading of his victim. There have been convincing hypotheses connecting animal cruelty with traits of antisocial personality, as well as credible paradigms considering this disorder as a developmental one, with criminal and cruel acts gradually becoming more and more severe (11-13). In an exhaustive review over anthropophagy, departing from a case report, Pfäfflin suggests that the cannibalistic deeds of individuals are always an expression of a severe psychopathology (14). As a matter of fact, almost all sources agree that if present, this behavior underscores a psychotic condition, mostly of a schizophrenic nature (15).

Our case has been since his detainment under strict surveillance and psychiatric involuntary treatment, with atypical antipsychotics being the main pharmacological drug on the therapeutic scheme, and with supportive psychotherapy included. We have tried to focus on the particular details of the cruel cannibalistic act, which has no precedent in the history of Albanian forensic psychiatry.

CONCLUSION

Cannibalistic behaviours might be a rarity, but their presence actually in criminal proceedings will require an in-depth and accurate psychiatric evaluation of the alleged perpetrator. The extreme cruelty of the act that we described above raised a natural interest of mass media and public, rendering the criminal event an issue of large debating. It is uncommon but not improbable, that schizophrenia, previously undiagnosed due to diversity of reasons, might present with anthropophagy.

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