Lords of the Garden. 1994. 55 min., color. Produced and directed by Judith Hallet for Hearst Entertainment. New York: Arts and Entertainment Television Networks; Paris: Tele-Image. Released in the United States in abridged form as ***Treehouse People: Cannibal Justice,*** VHS videocassette, 50 min.; distributed by A&E Television Networks (l-800-625-9000; http://www.aetv.com). US$24.95.

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Cannibal Tales: Review Essay

"Rumors about an all female tribe in Irian Jaya turn out to be false," reported the ***Jakarta Post*** (1991) after an Indonesian government expedition visited the Korowai in the interior lowlands of southern Irian Jaya. Initial reports suggested that "the tribe comprised females only and captured males from other tribes for reproductive purposes." These male prisoners and any male offspring were alleged to have been put to death. Instead, the government patrol established that the Korowai were "fully equipped with a supply of males," who "cover their genitals with cone shaped dried leaves, which are more simple than the better known ***koteka*** penis [gourds] worn by many other tribes" in Irian Jaya. They live in "thatch houses built high up on tree tops about 25 meters from the ground" (ibid.).

Such sensationalism commonly accompanies reports about the discovery of "isolated" or "lost" tribes in New Guinea (Kirsch 1997).[1] In 1995, it was announced that another tribe "practicing cannibalism [was] discovered in Irian Jaya" (British Broadcasting Corporation 1995). According to the official Indonesian news agency Antara, "the primitive tribe, living in tree houses, was sighted in the southern regency of Merauke" (ibid.). The members of this "new tribe" were described as "still living naked and still liv[ing] in trees . . . and [possibly] still practicing cannibalism." A month later the international news media reported that "Indonesia [is] preparing contacts with alleged tree cannibals" (Agence France Presse 1995).

Tree Cannibals on T.V.

This is the milieu of the film ***Lords of the Garden,*** which depicts Smithsonian Institution anthropologist Paul Taylor's 1993 visit to the Korowai.[2] The film was originally planned as part of a larger comparative research project on human use of the rain forest, although this broader program had been abandoned by. the time filming began. From the outset, filmmaker Judith Hallet sought to produce a documentary that represented "New Guinea as a

land of mystery, myths [and] headhunting" (cited in Kaupp 1994:9). Actor Mark Harmon introduces the shorter, broadcast version of the film, which was given the title ***Treehouse People: Cannibal Justice.***

The film is organized as a journey of discovery to the territory inhabited by the 4,000 Korowai. It follows Taylor and his entourage as they travel by plane and canoe and on foot through the rain forest. Harmon describes the hazards that the team faced, "clawing through the mud, fighting heat and insects--even chancing death." Their trip took them close to the "edge of the so-called 'pacification line,' . . . beyond which inter-clan warfare is active and outsiders cannot venture" (Kaupp 1994:8).[3] The threat of violence and frequent allusions to cannibalism are used to provide dramatic tension otherwise lacking in the film.

Taylor acknowledged the limitations of the project from the beginning, writing in his diary that the "concept of filming the anthropologist going to 'contact' a previously uncontacted group of people is outdated: 1) 'contact' is not a genre of valid anthropological research, and 2) even if it were, everybody here is already 'in contact' " (Kaupp 1994:9). Yet even if one sets aside the inappropriateness of the discovery paradigm for anthropological research, the Korowai are still presented as though they live in a vacuum. There are only two substantial exceptions: the tabloidlike opening vignette about the head-hunting Asmat and the disappearance of Michael Rockefeller (see Morris 1996:142-143), and brief references to the specter of precipitous change through logging.[4] Although Taylor justifies the project in the name of "science" (Sidharta 1994), the film makes little attempt to place its subject matter in the context of other ethnographic research in New Guinea. Either Taylor failed to do his homework or the structure of the film--an epic voyage into the unknown--prevented him from acknowledging how much is already well known.

In addition to the misguided focus on the researchers' perilous journey, two other themes of the film are the construction of Korowai treehouses and cannibalism, or at least the talk of cannibalism. In his attempt to tie these subjects together, Taylor posits a structural opposition between the "good life" symbolized by the domestic realm of treehouses and the shadow side of Korowai life, including cannibalism, murder, and hatred.[5]

A Room with a View

When Taylor climbs to the top of a Korowai treehouse for the first time, one of the crew members calls up to him, 'What's it like?" "Comfortable," he responds, "Lots of light, lots of ventilation, a penthouse suite." Taylor praises the architectural abilities of the Korowai, who build treehouses that soar as

tall as a six-story building without the use of saw, hammer, or nails, although today steel axes and knives expedite the task. Significantly, this was not the first Smithsonian Institution expedition to document the treehouses of New Guinea. In 1928, E. W. Brandes led a team of scientists who traveled from the Fly River to the Sepik River by plane, seeking disease-resistant varieties of sugarcane endemic to the island. His photographs of treehouses on the Ok Tedi River were published in ***National Geographic Magazine*** with the captions "The Interior of a Pygmy Tree-House Built 50 Feet Above Ground" and "An Upper Fly River Native Perches His House High In Air" (Brandes 1929:291, 309). The film failed to mention this expedition, even though a case full of artifacts collected by Brandes in New Guinea is still on display in the National Museum of Natural History building in which Taylor's office is located.

Treehouses like those depicted in the film were once the predominant architectural form in a wide area across the interior lowlands of southern New Guinea, a fact ignored by the film. One hundred miles east of the Korowai, the Yonggom people--with whom I spent two years conducting ethnographic research in the late 1980s--also had built treehouses, until the region was pacified in the 1940s. Quanchi has shown how images of treehouses figure significantly in the earliest photographs of the region (1993). He argues that Lindt's 1885 photograph of a Koiari treehouse taken near Port Moresby became the signifier "for Papua in the same way that Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen's 1900 photograph of a gaunt, desert Arunta" became iconic for all of Aboriginal Australia (ibid.:3). Built into the branches of a tree, the platform shelters of the central coast of Papua were significantly smaller, cruder, and lower in height than the elegant towers of the interior. Photographs of these treehouses were the "opening sign in a narrative of primitiveness . . . which [has] continued to the present" (ibid.:6). Taylor unwittingly recycles this colonial trope in ***Lords of the Garden.***

The most valuable aspect of the film concerns its depiction of interpersonal relations in scenes of the Korowai singing and joking among themselves. While paddling their canoes upstream, the young men burst into spontaneous call-and-response singing. This is later echoed by a group of women pounding sago pith, who sing of the boys they chose not to marry. Their songs exhibit the rhythmic pattern common to music throughout the southern interior of the island (Feld 1991). The enthusiastic shouts accompanying the felling of trees reminded me of the Yonggom, as did their teasing comments about the physical bulk of Taylor and company ("Be careful that they don't get hit by falling trees, we'd never be able to carry their bodies"), about the European aversion to physical labor ("They are people with white skin, they don't have axes"), and among themselves (the teenage

boys building the house wanted to live there unchaperoned, but its owner Yakob quipped that he and his wife planned to live there unchaperoned themselves). Here the film briefly surpasses written descriptions of bonhomie and humor in New Guinea.[6]

Cannibal Mongering

From the outset, the film was intended to emphasize Korowai cannibalism, a choice that Taylor rationalizes in terms of cultural relativism, defining the goal of anthropology as making "other people seem logical and reasonable and rational and understandable. If you can do that in New Guinea [laughs], you can do that anywhere." Proposing an analogy accessible to the film's popular audience, Taylor suggests that Korowai cannibalism functions as part of their "criminal justice system," distinguishing two varieties of cannibalism: "1) the sentence of death followed by cannibalism, given to criminals on an individual basis--in which a clan expels one of its own members to be killed and eaten by a neighboring clan with which it maintains reciprocal arrangements for carrying out such sentences; and 2) the murder and cannibalization that is the consequence of interclan warfare, in which an enemy may be killed and eaten" (Taylor, cited in Kaupp 1994:9). Taylor also compares Korowai cannibalism to capital punishment in the United States (Trescott 1994).

There are two shortcomings in Taylor's analysis. The first problem is that cannibalism is not a punishment meted out against persons convicted of crimes. There is no presumption of a fair trial based on evidence that is evaluated to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused, as the ***Wall Street Journal*** noted (1994). The second problem is that Taylor fails to explain why cannibalism is regarded as an appropriate form of retaliation for certain kinds of objectionable behavior. Cannibalism is the ideal response to acts of ***sorcery,*** which Taylor mentions only in passing, rather than crime. Cannibalism is the chosen form of retribution because this tradition imagines its victims as having been "consumed" by sorcery. (The metaphor is similar to the characterization of the wasting effects of tuberculosis as "consumption," although by a different agent.) Thus the consummate form of revenge for a death attributed to sorcery is for the victim's relatives to kill and eat the sorcerer (see Knauft 1985102-103; Kirsch 1991:112-113).[7] Some metaphors we live by; others we dine by.

Rosalind Morris criticized ***Lords of the Garden*** for its exoticizing emphasis on cannibalism (1996), arguing that the film and its makers naively follow the logic of the consumer age, which reduces all cultural differences to objects of mass marketing and public consumption: feasting on alterity has turned us into cultural cannibals, leading us to seek our mirror image in the

Korowai and their cannibal culture. Yet Morris does not persuade me that cannibalism is any more potent a figure of inverted sociality for contemporary capitalism than it was for nineteenth-century accounts of southern New Guinea (Knauft 1990, 1993), for African discourse about Europeans during the colonial era (e.g., Lewis 1986:63-66), or for that matter, still is for the Korowai. It is difficult to conceptualize a more viscerally compelling way to deny the humanity of "the other" than through the practice of cannibalism, or conversely, through its attribution to others.

The film's attention to cannibalism provoked some minor controversy but no serious debate apart from Morris's examination of "televisual" anthropology's dark side, in which disciplinary capital is exchanged for media sponsorship and exposure. Fearing the wrath of the Congressional Black Caucus, with whom museum officials had already quarreled over what proved to be incorrect references to cannibalism in its African galleries, the Smithsonian Institution delayed the American broadcast premiere until after budget hearings in Washington (Trescott 1994). Decrying Taylor's cultural relativism, the ***Wall Street Journal*** (1994) asserted that the film endorsed cannibalism as "just another life-style choice" (Harrop 1994). Cartoonist Berkeley Breathed gave the affair a final, ironic twist in his Sunday comic strip depicting a "headhunter" who rejects the label "cannibal" in favor of the less-prejudicial "taste bud challenged" (1994).

The problem is not with cannibalism as a legitimate subject of inquiry, nor with cultural relativism as the appropriate starting point in efforts to understand cannibalism. Yet when filmmaker Hallet accompanies a voice-over description of Korowai cannibalism with a scene depicting a group of men--their bows held high and their arrows drawn--circling with clearly ominous intent, ***Lords of the Garden*** descends into farce, subsuming Taylor's relativistic pretensions in the process. Worthwhile considering, in contrast, is what Conklin has described as the more judicious handling of Wari' cannibalism in Brazil:

> Before the contact, rumors of people-eating contributed to images of the Wari' as ruthless savages and intensified public pressures to pacify them. After the contact, the reality of cannibalism and the perceived need to stop it gave moral purpose to the work of the individual missionaries, priests and government agents who were most closely involved in the Wari' contacts. Treatments of Wari' cannibals were far from one-sided, however. Even in the midst of the clamor to pacify the savages, journalists sometimes balanced the stories of Indian savagery with critiques of Brazilian inhumanity.

> One of the notable aspects of the Wari' story is that it was not just intellectuals who treated cannibalism with empathy and relativism. Rather, it was missionaries, priests and government agents--people directly involved in the work of pacifying and "civilizing" the Indians--who tried hardest to keep negative stereotypes out of the public images of the Wari'. . . . Instead of promoting notions of Indian savagery, some of the colonizers purposefully tried to suppress or reframe information about Wari' people-eating in ways that drew a distinction between cultural traditions and innate character, and affirmed the humanity of the cannibals themselves. (Conklin 1997:76)

In contrast, Taylor's desire to present a humanizing portrait of the Korowai remains at odds with the resulting film.

Political Economy and Ethnographic Responsibility

After querying Yakob, the main Korowai figure in the film, about his expectations and aspirations for the future, Taylor wistfully declares that Yakob cannot comprehend what the fates have in store for him, because he is "not being told that this area is a logging concession." Although the film relies on an omniscient narrator throughout, a convention generally eschewed in contemporary ethnographic films (Loizos 1993:12-13), it still comes as a shock when anthropologist Taylor adopts a similar position himself vis-à-vis the Korowai. It is also difficult to reconcile his odd insistence that the "effects we are having [on the Korowai] concern me a great deal" with his assertion that "this may be the last chance to observe a way of life that may very soon disappear" and his knowledge of the state's economic interests in the region.

What influence might this film have should the Korowai try to protect their land rights in response to government-sponsored plans for logging? Would it support or undermine a plea to respect their autonomy? What are the political consequences of representing the Korowai as unknowing innocents, incapable of comprehending their future, or of assuming that the demise of their way of life is inevitable? The film offers no explanation for why this must be their fate, no examination of the political system that is responsible, and no consideration of whether these events have any connection to us, the audience, as potential consumers of tropical hardwoods or in other ways. There are no clear rules to guide anthropologists in conducting research where the economic and political stakes are so great. Given the close working relations that anthropologists establish with the subjects of their research, responsibilities are configured differently for them than for

scholars in the other social sciences. Should anthropologists always align themselves with the subaltern's point of view? Or conversely, do anthropologists tacitly endorse the positions of those in power if they fail to call attention to injustice and inequality?

These questions are fundamental to ethnographic inquiry everywhere, although they have a distinctive valence in Irian Jaya, which is one reason why so little ethnographic research has been carried out there in the last three decades. Is it productive to talk about protecting the traditional land rights of the Korowai when the Indonesian government only recognizes individual land ownership and when land tenure for shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering, has no legal status? Perhaps there should be an ethnographic equivalent to the efforts of local nongovernmental organizations to address these issues in Paniai, Asmat, and Lorentz (Burnett 1997). These groups are working to demarcate community land boundaries, providing people with new tools to conceptualize and manage their resources. The new systems of land tenure they help create may facilitate legal recognition of local rights.

It is imperative that anthropologists grapple with these issues in their work. Not only does it make for better ethnography, but it also helps anthropologists fulfill their responsibilities to the people represented in the texts and films they produce, people like the Korowai translator Yakob. ***Lords of the Garden*** could not have been made without Yakob's help, although his articulate presence continually undercuts the film's claim that the Korowai have little contact with the world around them. The film would have been far more valuable had the filmmakers paid greater attention to Yakob's experiences in moving between his home atop the forest and the rest of Irian Jaya, as well as to his reactions to the powerful new forces with which the Korowai must now contend in this rapidly changing backwater of Indonesia. We are left to imagine the insights of a film that would take Yakob's journeys of exploration as its focus, rather than Taylor's.

NOTES

1. In Indonesian, these groups are known as *masyarakat terasing,* isolated peoples or tribes, denoting physical seclusion and suggesting foreign or exotic qualities (Gay-nor 1997). The implicit contrast between *masyarakat terasing* and "developed peoples" provides legitimation for development projects that target these communities and their resources.

2. I am grateful to Lorraine Aragon, John Burke Burnett, Lisa Klopfer, and Bruce Knauft for their insightful comments on this review, although they are not responsible for the views expressed here.

3. Steinmetz describes the "pacification line" as the "shifting and often indistinct border between those Korowai who have had direct contact with outsiders and the upstream

clans, known as *betul,* or true Korowai, who refuse it" (1996:37). In other words, the Korowai living in the outer region prefer to keep their distance from the Indonesian state and all that it entails. In this regard, Korowai isolation should be seen as a form of social relations rather than as a natural condition (see Kirsch 1997).

4. The references to the Asmat and Michael Rockefeller's death have more to do with establishing Irian Jaya as the concrete referent for audiences' ideas about head-hunting and violence than with any cultural or linguistic link between the Asmat and the Korowai (Grimes 1996).

5. Knauft identifies a similar opposition in *Good Company and Violence,* his study of Gebusi sorcery: "Perhaps the most striking feature of sorcery in Gebusi culture is the way it both creates and reflects a huge gap between good company and violence. The tension between good company and violence is reflected consistently in Gebusi social life--in ethos, social structure, rituals, narratives, and seances, as well as in sorcery attributions. As Kenelm Burridge (1969: xviii) might put it, the juxtaposition of good company and violence is the primary dialectic of Gebusi society and culture" (Knauft 1985:330).

6. Few films have taken such humorous but revealing exchanges as their subject, although see *Under the Men's Tree* (MacDougall and MacDougall 1973).

7. Such practices have long been outlawed in Papua New Guinea.

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