
THE FIGURE OF CANNIBAL IN THE TRADITIONAL NANAI CULTURE

Yana S. Ivaschenko^{1*} and Anna V. Akhmetova²

¹ *Komsomolsk-on-Amur State Technical University, Department of Cultural Studies, Lenin Str. 27, 681013, Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Russia*

² *Komsomolsk-on-Amur State Technical University, Department of History and Archival Studies, Lenin Str. 27, 681013, Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Russia*

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Abstract

The paper investigates the issue of how the Nanais – the indigenous people of Russia's Far East – view the phenomenon of cannibalism. The time frame of the study covers the period of late XIX – first half of XX century. The study of the semantics of 'cannibalism' shall have significance for our understanding of food culture and patterns, ritual behaviour, sex relationships, and the folklore of the Nanai. Consequences we draw may also be useful to colleagues studying similar things in other regions and for establishing culture analogies and differences.

As the result of the study, we prove that cannibalism was viewed by the Nanais as a type of social deviation, a symptom telling of backwardness and degradation of man down to the level of a 'natural' or 'demonic' creature. The appearance of this idea in a folklore text means that the related persona enters the liminal phase, i.e. that the time of initiation is about to come. With this 'cannibal' figure - correlated with the male sex - the Nanais expressed their view of non-socialized sexuality and demonstrated the danger and risk to which women may be exposed in case of adulterous relationships. All these connotations were formative for the development of the idea of the 'alien' in the Nanai culture.

Our key sources have been folklore texts of the Nanais, mainly fairy tales. To prove some of our assertions we also draw on archival documents, ethnographic data from the Far East, and the folklore of neighbouring or genetically related peoples. For the analysis of folklore and conventional assumptions we employ the structural-functional method of C. Levy-Strauss, the idea of a three-dimensional semiosis by C. Morris and some of the key theses of the interpretative anthropology of C. Geertz.

Keywords: cannibalism, ritual behaviour, initiation, sexual relationships

1. Introduction

The Nanais are the most numerous indigenous people of the southern branch of the Tungus-Manchu language family. Most of them are settled in compact groups in the Russia's far eastern region along the course of the Amur river and its tributaries. Till mid XX century the Nanais practiced the foraging

*E-mail: iva_ya@mail.ru, phone: +79141612726

type of economy. Their key occupation was fishing combined with hunting and gathering. The underlying basis of their diet was fish.

As some recent comparative studies of traditional food culture of different peoples have demonstrated, the protein food domination prevented the rise and spread of cannibalism. Accordingly, the latter's absence from the life of a people was not to be legitimated in ritual [1]. Indeed, in the Amur river region, we have revealed no cases of legitimate cannibalism; on the other hand several instances of it were observed with the Evenkis who are genetically related to the Nanais. These incidents were rather isolated than typical. Of this we shall talk later on. The fact that the Nanais used to have no anthropophagy, or rather that this element was not 'articulated' in their culture, testifies to that this phenomenon was not accepted among them in the past.

The phenomenon of cannibalism in the peoples of the Amur river region and the whole of the far east of Russia has, as far as we know, not ever been the object of scientific reflection. The research interest in this problem stems from the fact that in the situation of practical non-existence of anthropophagy in the actual life of the Nanais, the figure of a *cannibal* emerges in their folklore rather too often. This is actually the key problem we are trying to tackle in our study.

In these texts, the topic of cannibalism is closely intertwined with such plotlines as initiation, ritual meal, male-female relationships including sex. The traits of a *cannibal* persona are used for depicting the *alien* both on the mythological and social levels. From this perspective, the problem under investigation here may be revealing for the study of the Nanais' cosmology and their relations with other ethnic groups.

Late XIX – beginning of XX century Orthodox Mission worked actively among the Nanais and with the 1930 Soviet propagandists imposed atheistic views. Despite all this Nanais was able to preserve their religion, which has become actual again with the 1990s. Today Nanais' shamanistic ideas combined with elements of the Orthodox religion. In some villages Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses are spreading Protestant creed.

To our goals and tasks herein belongs a thorough investigation of all sources containing information on cannibalism among the Nanais, and bringing out the semantics and the dynamic principles of this folklore figure along with its role in the development of other plotlines in a folktale narrative.

2. Method

In the course of an integrated study of archival documents, folklore texts and ethnographic materials about the Nanais, we have arrived at new and innovative conclusions concerning the social and moral norms of the Nanais, their ritual practices and beliefs. We have to bear in mind, however, that systematic study of the indigenous peoples of the Amur river peoples were first carried out as early as late XIX century. By that time, many rites and beliefs were already extinct, for which reason they have not been recorded in other

studies of the Nanais. Therefore, for the study of a *cannibal* persona in this people's culture, its folklore texts are of primary importance.

Cannibal in the Nanai culture has a multiple meaning. In the course of our investigation we have revealed his manifold connotative semantics, the principles of its change over time during the period between late XIX – early XX century; we also have brought out the crucial role of this persona in socialization processes of the Nanais.

3. An episode of cannibalism on the official record and in the mass media of the Russian Empire

A solitary incident of cannibalism that took place in the far east of Russia is set forth in documents from the collection of the Russian State Historical Archive. The folder contains a letter of explanation from the governor of the Yakutia Governorate addressed to the head of the Department for General Issues at the Interior Ministry of the Russian Empire - Alexei Dmitrievitsch Arbuzov; there are also newspaper clippings covering the story [*A Secret Investigation in the Yakut Region*, Russian State Historical Archive, collection 1284, inventory 47, folder 151].

The letter tells of the events that occurred in 1907–1908 and that were linked to the investigation of the case of the murder of a Lamut family named the Kamovs (the Lamuts – the old designation for the Evens, was still in use in the early XX century; the text of the document employs this outdated ethnonym). In the course of hunting, the Kamovs family has gone too deep into the taiga – to “deserted places of the Yakutia region along the Korkodon river” [*A Secret Investigation in the Yakut Region*, Russian State Historical Archive, collection 1284, inventory 47, folder 151, 6]. The police investigation established that the murder was committed by one of the family members with the purpose of satisfying his hunger. In the governor's letter this conclusion is explained by the fact that the examination of the last camp of the Kamovs family discovered “no food <...> whatsoever” [*A Secret Investigation in the Yakut Region*, Russian State Historical Archive, collection 1284, inventory 47, folder 151, 6]. The bones and the half-decayed body of one of the Kamovs – the one who presumably had eaten his relatives – were found in the taiga by two Tungus (the old name of the Evenkis still in use in early XX century, at times also applied to the Evens; the text of the document employs this outdated ethnonym). These two hunters reported the case to the authorities.

The Kamovs' case received publicity in the central press of the Russian Empire. We might put forth a conjecture that in the Amur region, particularly in its remote taiga quarters, there could have been more than one such case. On the other hand, the reaction of the Tungus hunters who discovered the bodies and the public outcry stirred by this horrible event give us some grounds to believe that such events were not typical either for local hunters or for local authorities. It seems rather natural to think that the reason for this deviation was hunger.

It happened in the deep taiga forest far from the Amur river. Indeed, as early XX century expedition materials show [*Materials on the Survey of Uninhabited Areas of the Amur River Region (A Survey of the Right Bank of the River) (1908)*, Russian State Historical Archive, collection 391, inventory 3, folder 1181; *A Report of the Chief Investigator G. Rubinsky on the Survey of the Amgun River Region (1907)*, Russian State Historical Archive, collection 391, inventory 3, folder 1181], food resources of the taiga forests in the far east of the country had been by that time already half-exhausted. The forest could not provide nutrition even to small hunter tribes. This was the reason why many of them – chiefly the Evens and Evenkis – moved closer to the main stream of the Amur river or would migrate there regularly at summer time. Here, at the shores of a larger river, could they find enough food for their families, mostly fish. At the new place they gradually assimilated with the local tribes including the Nanais. Thus, for the purposes of this study, we view it as reasonably justified to use materials about both the Evens and Evenkis. Therewith, a comparison of the cannibalism case in the deep taiga region with the far more favourable subsistence situation along the Amur river adds more force to our argumentation concerning the question why anthropophagy has not been observed among the Nanais.

4. Cannibalism in folklore texts

So then, neither in governmental records nor in ethnographic sources did we find any mention about Nanais' cannibalism. The study of this subject in other tribes globally, for instance, in several Bolivian indigenous communities in South America, demonstrates that repercussions of cannibalism may be revealed in other forms – in ritual practices. Real action is substituted there with symbolic one [2]. However, in the Nanai culture there are no traces of such rites that may be regarded as a reminiscence of their cannibalism in the past. Even in the food culture of the Amur river basin peoples we find no taboos related to humans eating each other, while in their myths and folktales the interpretations and transformations of this idea are plentiful.

Analysis of these sources does not give us much ground for a distinct classification of the associative links the idea of cannibalism produced in the traditional Nanai mind. We tend to believe that the texts recorded by researchers in the XIX–XX centuries. had indeed formed themselves much earlier, which makes them too structureless to be easily broken down into clear thematic blocks. It seems reasonable, however, to parcel them into groups by the following semantic parameters of our choice: *cannibal* persona's attributes, cannibalism and initiation, cannibalism and food culture, cannibalism and sex relationships.

4.1. Attributes of a cannibal - regional cultural similarities

The figure of a *cannibal* in folktale narratives of the Nanais appears to be very expressive. The Nanais linked it to the taiga forest and to awesome demonic forces. S.V. Ivanov – ethnographer who studied the Nanai culture in mid XX century – writes that the Nanais believe in cannibals who are in fact vicious ghosts called *busseu*; they descend from people who committed suicide. The *busseu* are gnawing at the bones of dead people in their tombs [3].

The interpretation of the act of eating one's own kind contributed to the development of the concept of the *alien*. The Nanais' understanding of it is very similar to that of the Evenkis. The latter, in the figure of the *mangi*-demon – a cannibal very much like the Nanais' *busseu* – represented a Russian Cossack who brings alcohol with him and thereby makes their people weak. Seeing the Evenkis enfeebled, he attacks and kills them [4]. *Alien cannibals* in the folktexts of the Nanais are called *bald-headed*, while in the Nanai language the concepts of 'bald spot' and 'skull' are designated by the same word *khoto* [5]. In the Evenkis' language the same lexeme was used for shinbone or cannon-bone [6]. In both instances we see the meaning of 'denudation of a bone' – the process taking place in dead bodies; this also links the idea to the world of the dead. In addition to the above, the Nanais described *cannibals* with the meat of a human they have just eaten stuck in their teeth (see folktales: 'The Evil Ghost *Khondori-Chako*' [7], 'Once upon a Time there Lived two *Pudis* – the Elder and the Younger' [8]. Also the Evenkis emphasized the teeth of a *cannibal*: he bares them. In their opinion, *cannibals* were capable of shape-shifting, had terrifying jaws and a passion for human blood [4, p. 39-43]. In the Nanai sources we also find references to a link between *cannibals* and blood-sucking creatures: in the folktale 'There were Two Sisters' the body of a *cannibal* – after his death – falls to small pieces in the form of spiders, mosquitoes, midges and other small insects [9].

The representation of teeth with meat stuck in-between them indicates the 'animal-like' way of eating (ripping and tearing the flesh), while the accent on blood sucking tells of a similarity with sanguivorous insects. The indigenous peoples of the Amur river region opposed themselves to all these demons, cannibals and vampires. The humans had the custom of eating meat by small pieces only after chopping and cutting it with a knife; otherwise a knife was used for the same purpose during the process of eating. The blood of large animals – which was actually part of the Nanais' diet – was first drained off into special vessels and only then drunk.

Thus, we can conclude that both peoples described a *cannibal* as a creature similar or related to carnivorous animals, demons (*buseu*, *amba* or *mangi*), or death. This interpretation of the idea was typical for the Amur river region.

In accordance with the semantic links established above, we can also draw other consequences, such as: death in folktale was interpreted by the Nanais as a process of decay and degradation leading from the human world 'into the

nature', and, respectively, cannibalism was viewed as moral degradation down to the level of a demon hiding in the deep forest.

The development of these connotations within the soviet social and political discourse of the first half of the XX century is also of some interest. Such *cannibals*' characteristics as their 'animal' life, shape-shifting, and parasitism transformed themselves into a range of new concepts. The word *cannibal* began to be used by the Nanais – already citizens of the USSR – to express their attitude towards 'leisured elements' of the society or to shamans who 'drink the blood of the people' and 'eat them out of house and home'. Shamanism, accordingly, was viewed as a symptom of ignorance, cultural backwardness and social evil. These ideas found their place in modern Nanai folktales, songs and amateur theatrical shows; A.P. Putintseva recorded some of them in her materials [10].

4.2. *Cannibalism and initiation*

It should be also noted that there is another characteristic of a *cannibal* that is of interest for the purposes of our study: we mean the role a *cannibal* plays in narratives depicting the initiation-linked travel of young females. In these folktales a *cannibal* acts as a sacral, demonic and marginal creature (see the fairy tales 'The Evil Ghost *Khondori-chako*' [7]; 'A Story of *Margan* and *Fudin* Overcoming the Bald-heads'; 'A Story of *Margan* Punishing Women-shamans', 'There were two Women' [11]), the girls of a reproductive age – by virtue of their female nature – at first welcoming the *cannibal* but then escaping from him and even dying after having relations with him.

In the narratives representing the story of a pursuit of a girl by a demon-*cannibal* we observe certain initiation motifs linked to sexual emotions. Gaining some sexual experience, as far as we can judge by the Nanai folktales, used to be part of initiation rites. The motif of a girl fleeing and a half-human – half-animal chasing her is one of the quite widespread elements of initiation and matrimonial ritualism in the culture of different nations and tribes globally. According to an outstanding Russian sexologist and sociologist Igor Kon, "the escape attempt during a wedding ceremony is a symbolic reminiscence of what used to precede defloration in the times when it was carried out by an animal. A girl, frightened, ran away, was caught up and forcibly brought back; after that she was exposed to an attack by an animal, which, most probably, could potentially lead to a lethal outcome." [I.S. Kon, *A History of Sexual Rituals*, <http://www.sexology.hut.ru>, accessed 20 January 2005]

This is a rather widespread narrative motif of the Nanai folktales; it may have stemmed from a type of totemic myths telling about cohabitation of a woman and a tiger or bear, fragments of which had preserved themselves in the Nanai folklore as late as XIX–XX centuries (clan-myths of the Nanai: 'The Clan of *Akhtanka* – the Tiger Clan' [7, p. 7-8], 'The Wife of the Tiger from the *Akhtanka* Clan' [11]; a clan legend 'There were a Cousin-Brother and a Cousin-Sister' [12]. In these narratives the relationship between a woman and a beast

was first based upon fear (felt by the woman) that later evaporated due to help and protection offered by the animal. In some cases, for instance in the abovementioned clan legend, the women undergoing initiation could shape-shift themselves and turn into bears. Thus, the very initiation context may prompt the women go beyond their social space and established social norms.

4.3. Cannibalism and the Nanai food culture and tradition

Other traits of the *cannibal* persona of the texts suggest there are links between it and the food culture and tradition; this, however, does not indicate any cannibalism-related taboos. In the Nanai fairy-tale ‘There were Two Girls’ both *cannibal’s* legs had the form of roasting jacks or rods. In this shape he travelled to the house of two grown-up females [9]. From the Nanai folktales and rituals we also know that the semantic pair for this item is a cooking kettle. This attribute of human lodgings and kitchen appears in these texts as a vessel used by girls – overwhelmed by sexual desire – for washing themselves, or as a thing used for the transformation of heroines during initiation after their bodies have been dismembered by *cannibals*. The opposition of a roasting jack and a kettle in the Nanai culture stands for sex dimorphism.

We have studied in detail the processes of signification of these attributes of the Nanai traditional cooking practices by analysing such fairy-tales as ‘A Disobedient Beauty’, ‘Three Swallows, *Ilan Chifiaku*’ [7, p. 17-21], ‘*Diabdian-Margan*, Young Man the Boa’ [7, p. 43-48], ‘The Granary Woman’ [11, p. 105-141]; ‘*Garildan* and *Gabrildan*’ [11, p. 141-181]. These data have been verified by comparing them with ethnographic materials containing the description of the life of the Nanais.

kettle	roasting jack/rod
regular	irregular
human lodgings	taiga forest
female	male
ordinary`	sacral/demonic

A kettle or vessel with soft food in it – evenly and properly cooked – was for the Nanai the symbol of the female element of life in a house. A roasting jack or rod for impaling hard food – in order to roast the latter on fire from all its sides while the inside of it may stay raw – stood for the male element and for being outside of the house, in the taiga forest.

These two items and their properties also represented the male and female types of behaviour, respectively, and the division of labour: a woman’s work was regular throughout both a single day and a whole year, while men’s activities – often risk-bearing – implied intensive work at some periods intermittent with long spans of idleness. It was a cooking kettle that took the central place and role in a human lodging, the most common symbol of all lifecycle rituals; at the same time a roasting rod was used only for initiation procedures. In everyday life both items were spatially apart: the one for home use, the other – for outside use. Their reunification took place only in folklore

narratives, which symbolized the maturing of the personas and their transformation due to initiation.

The variations of these male and female symbols in one of the Nanai clan myths are a wooden stick driven into the snow by a *margan's* (young boy's) mother to indicate that it is time to go hunting into the taiga forest and bring 'fresh liver', on the one hand, and the snow 'blanket' already deep enough for the stick to stand in it upright, on the other (Text 15, Clan myth (the Nanais)) [13]. In this text the young boy's mother first indicates the correct correlation between the holes: the one in the snow and the stick in it, and the mouth and 'fresh liver'. The son, however, indulging the whims of his fastidious wife – the one he found after setting the stick up and a subsequent travel into the taiga forest – has broken these rules. "If you love me truly – says the young wife - <...> cover with kisses my genitalia" [13, p. 51]. The husband satisfies her and is punished for this by the *father-master*.

The same story is recorded in another source (the legend 'Where from the Clan of the *Samar-Mongols* Descends' [7, p. 97-100]. Here we discover an extra motive for travelling into the forest: the mother – wishing to send her son off in quest of a wife – tells him: "The old liver is not tasty any longer, it has gone stale and skinny all over". Which means that much as the 'fresh liver' is to substitute the 'skinny one', a new mistress of the house is to take place of the old one.

We are inclined to believe that liver as a symbolic substitution for a female persona appears in this myth not accidentally. To explore the mythic and ritual semantics of this food we drew on the materials concerning the topos of establishing kinship by feeding, from folklore texts of other peoples in the region: the Evenkis, the Negidals and the Yakuts. According to these peoples' mythology, an orphaned child grows up because he/she eats the liver voluntarily provided to him/her by a burbot or salmon trout. These ideas have much in common with those of the Altaians and the Khakass who believed that not only the growth but also the conception of a baby is linked to this bodily organ. Liver is also the place where vexation of mind originates. The Khakass had a saying: "my child came out of the liver" [14].

The latter meanings were widespread among various Siberian peoples; at the same time they were in communication with the peoples of the Amur river region through the mediation of the nomadic Tungus tribes (for the convenience of the reader we should probable note here that Siberia and the Amur river basin are two distinctly separated yet adjoining regions of the Asiatic Russia). These connotations clarify the sense of the above analysed Nanai clan myth and legend 'Where from the Clan of the *Samar-Mongols* Descends': the properties of the internal part of an animal (fresh/skinned) are not only an indication of the age of the female personas, but they also serve to symbolize the mother's instruction to go to the forest and find 'fresh liver' or a wife for continuation of the family.

Summing up this section, we can say that this 'fresh liver' – as a body part – plays in the folklore texts the role of a symbolic substitution for a young female. The obtaining and eating of the liver is a sign of the establishment of

kinship by marriage. In the narratives characterized above, we can also trace a link between eating flesh and sexual relationships.

4.4. Cannibalism and sex

An association between food practices, sex and cannibalism can be found in still another Nanai folk narrative: fairy tale ‘The Evil Ghost – *Khondori-Chako*’ [7]. It tells a story about two sisters – a younger and an elder – who live far away in the forest alone. When the elder one reaches matrimonial age, a strange guest comes to them. The elder sister feeds him and makes a bed for him close to hers. By night he shape-shifts into a *cannibal* demon and starts eating her alive.

The younger sister, awakened by unusual moans being made by her sister, peeps into her bedroom through a slot in the partition between their respective beds, and sees the following: “*Khondori-Chako* is pinching off parts of her sister’s body and puts them in his mouth. Already, half of the sister has been eaten. The sister is moaning less and less frequently, her cries growing fainter.” [7, p. 53] The younger sister, horrified, runs away from *Khondori-Chako*. After such relationships with the *cannibal* the elder sister dies, but is miraculously restored to life some time later. This text provides an example of the children’s (meaning ‘traditional’) view of sexual intercourse that is regarded by the younger sister as flesh eating. From the same perspective, lonely men living in the taiga forest – or any other strangers – are identified as demon-cannibals.

It should be noted here, that in the Nanai fairy tales recorded in the soviet times, the younger sister as virtuous is often opposed to the elder one as sex-obsessed. In this we can see certain similarities with the opposition of the new (soviet) and the old (pre-soviet) moral norms and customs. The misfortune that afflicts the elder sister in the above narrative is explained from the standpoint of the ‘new’ sexual morality: “where there is a weak woman, he <i.e. *Khondori-Chako*> falls upon her” [7, p. 54].

In the fairy-tale ‘How *Margan* and *Fudin* Overcome the Bald-heads’ we also find the motif of the girls’ death - by the hands of *cannibals* - (via dismemberment and being put into a cooking kettle) and their subsequent revival [7, p. 73]. The sequence of events in the text reproduces the symbolism and the structure of the initiation ritual (departure from home, death, dismemberment of the body, revival) that precedes a wedding. In this text, the number of sisters who leave home (seven) is matched by the number of the *bald-heads*, which is an indication of the forming of temporary ‘couples’ and of the link between the number ‘seven’ and the act of ‘passage’. The sex-obsessed elder sisters are saved by the younger one who disapproves of the behaviour of her female relatives from the very beginning of the narrative. After their successive death and revival, all sisters get married, but become wives of another *margan* found for them by their wise younger *fudin* (girl).

A symbolic variant of the initiation copulation can be viewed in the pre-wedding ritual meal of the groom and the bride together. However, the existence of this ceremony in the past can be proved only by folklore materials – just like in the case of its prototype. In these sources, the ritual food is usually meat (fairy tales ‘There lived two girls’ [9], ‘There was a *pudi*’ [11], ‘There were forty people’ [11], ‘*Kochoa* the Manchu Nut’ [7, p. 16-17], ‘The younger son of *Fiokh* the Sacral Tree Spirit’). The evidence of such acts being linked to initiation and wedding rituality is to be found in the following succession of narrative events we see in some texts: the relationship of different-sex heroes begins only after they ‘have eaten together’; personas of one of the tales refuse to be yoked in marriage until they have a meal together (fairy-tale ‘There lived two girls’) [4, p. 122-126].

In the everyday context, according to ethnographic data, each member of a typical Nanai family ate separately at his/her own table. Wives never ate together with their husbands [15]. Thus, the result of a hero/heroine’s sharing a meal with the person of opposite sex was the finding of a spouse. The same act with a same-sex person may bring about the death of the hero/heroine (fairy-tale ‘How *margan* punished women-shamans’ [7, p. 81-84]).

In fairy-tales, we find a variant of a shared-meal ritual which is the motif of the groom hunting a beast and bringing its carcass to his bride, or the underage female eating together with a ghost after which she gives birth to a strange or unusual baby. In ethnographic sources from the XX century we do not find any traces of eating meat together, or even giving meat as a present or gift. The mediating role of meat was taken over by strong spirits [15-17].

5. Conclusions

Summing up our study, we can assert that the analysis of the Nanai fairy tales has demonstrated that there is a link between the figure of a *cannibal* and: male sex, taiga forest, liminal status and unregulated sex relationships. In the XX century, the further development of the figure of a *cannibal* took the form of incorporating new soviet ideologemes into the old myth and folktale narratives. As a result, there shaped themselves plots of a didactic nature that reflected the realities of the new social order. Shamans found themselves in the class of unsocialized, wild people ‘from the forest’: at first due to their mediating role between the world of the humans and that of the spirits and their living separately outside a village, and then due to their ‘parasitic’ way of life – from the point of view of the socialist ethics and lifestyle.

The folktale figure of a *cannibal* served in the Nanai traditional culture to show people’s attitude towards the untamed, unsocialized sexuality that, however, was tolerated in the past, according to some folklore texts. The Nanais’ attitude towards anthropophagy was negative both in the XIX century and later, in the XX century. On the other hand, this people had no explicitly formulated ban or taboo concerning cannibalism that would imply punishment. The non-acceptance of anthropophagy by the Nanais is explained by their desire to create

a distance between the zone of the shape-shifting ghosts of the forest and the humans, between the unexplored wilderness and familiar world. A *cannibal* was perceived as an attribute of the *alien* space located somewhere far beyond the land where they settled. The absence of an explicit taboo can be accounted for by the fact that in that territory cannibalism has never been a widespread phenomenon, due to which there was no need to formulate the taboo in a prescriptive form.

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