

## Aztec Cannibalism and the Calorific Obsession

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## REPORTS AND COMMENTS

### Aztec Cannibalism and the Calorific Obsession

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Garn's comments (*AA* 81:902-903, 1979) on Harner's (1977) hypothesis on Aztec cannibalism hits the nail right on the thumb. Although Vayda and McCay (1975:295) and many others have recognized the dangers inherent in a calorific obsession in ecological anthropology, much analysis continues to be carried out based on an uncritical use of energetic efficiency as a primary criterion. Garn's comments are another manifestation of this obsession. He argues forcefully that eating people is highly inefficient in terms of calories, and provides statistics in support. This fails, however, to shed any new light on the issue. That it is inefficient to eat at the top of the food chain is a fairly self-evident phenomenon. And energetic efficiency is not the critical issue for the Aztec, according to Harner. Harner discusses cannibalism as a source of protein; Garn's comments on energy do not address the position he is arguing against. As for Garn's assertion that it would have required vast amounts of meat to provide the population with mere occasional tidbits, Harner states, "But the point of this paper is not to prove that cannibalism made a contribution to the diet of the total population" (1977:129). That Garn chose the strategy he did to attack Harner's position implies a belief that energetic efficiency stands above all others with regard to adaptation. Harner aptly shows this to be false. Perhaps the most important implication of Harner's work is that there are factors other than energetic efficiency which need to be considered, depending upon the exigencies of particular situations.

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### Affluent Hunters? Some Comments in Light of the Alyawara Case

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Our recent analysis (O'Connell and Hawkes in press) of plant food collecting among the Alyawara, a central Australian hunting group, shows that the cost of subsistence is sometimes quite high, far higher than the current conventional wisdom regarding hunters would suggest. We infer from available data that under traditional conditions, Alyawara women may have spent up to 70 hours per week collecting and processing enough food for themselves alone. If this inference is valid, it contradicts the widely held notions (1) that hunters seldom spend much time on the food quest, and (2) that they consistently underuse resources and labor.<sup>1</sup> This contradiction results not from special features of the Alyawara case, but from different methods of calculating the costs of subsistence. The approach we take not only provides a more realistic view of these costs, but facilitates the development of testable hypotheses concerning