

‘A CHILD IS BEING EATEN’: PSYCHOANALYSIS IN TIMES OF ANTIBLACKNESS

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Introduction

Róheim’s psychoanalytic, colonial archive is one of the few attempts to document the psychic life of subjects living under settler colonialism, by collecting accounts of dreams, child-rearing practices, myths, and rituals. Róheim’s psychoanalytic humanism has been well-established by historians of psychoanalysis (Robinson, 1972; Anderson, 2014; Bar-Haim, 2021; Bar-Haim, 2022; Damousi, 2011). Similarly, a lot of emphasis has been paid to Róheim’s contributions to the psychoanalytic study of aboriginal childhood (Morton, 2011), as well as his turn to the psychoanalytic exploration of maternal subjectivity. However, Róheim’s account of aboriginal motherhood as driven by the urge to merge with the child through devouring, needs more attention, as accusations of cannibalism often accompanied cruel colonial policies targeting aboriginal families. In this paper, I contextualise Géza Róheim’s psychoanalytic insights on the unconscious motives of cannibalism and infanticide amongst first nation Australian mothers and evaluate his paradoxical thesis that aboriginal mothers ate their babies, whilst the surviving children were not psychologically injured, but, actually, lacked anxiety. I argue that once we turn our focus to the totality of antiblack hatred during colonialism, Róheim’s quasi-forgiving view towards maternal cannibalism, exposes the limitations of the encounters between psychoanalysis and colonialism, which is crucial for our thinking about psychoanalysis, decolonially, today.

The paradoxes and ambivalences in Róheim’s work have not been ignored by scholars. The historian Paul Robinson considered Róheim a ‘Freudian radical’ who fiercely defended Freudian orthodoxy (Robinson, 1972). Others, like Joy Damousi, have exposed Róheim’s simultaneously colonial and decolonial positionality: Róheim attributed depth and complexity to the allegedly ‘simple’, aboriginal mind, whilst assuming aboriginals also shared global,

universal Western-based unconscious structures (Damousi, 2011). Similarly, focusing on his account of aboriginal motherhood during the interwar period, Shaul Bar-Haim showed that Róheim offered simultaneously a paradigm against the alleged cruelty of Western mothering, and at the same time, amplified the idealisation of primitive motherhood (Bar-Haim, 2021). The tensions in Róheim's work certainly expose the inherent tensions between psychoanalysis and colonialism. Yet, it seems to me that contemporary critiques of Róheim's view of aboriginal life miss a crucial ingredient of colonialism: the question of cannibalism. Cannibalism has been a persistent, prevailing Western myth about how menacing the indigenous body can be. Responsible for the exoticisation, eroticisation, and dehumanisation of the colonised, cannibalism has been an indispensable component of Western imagery until the 1970s, when the anthropological debate over whether man-eating cultures actually existed, or whether they were a product of the salacious, colonial imagination broke out (Arens, 1979; Shalins, 1979; Lumholtz, 1979; Obeyesekere, 2005). In contemporary scholarship, cannibalism signifies, as Kyla Tomkins put it, 'the total primitive otherness against which Western rationality – and its installation of the putatively ungendered and deracinated 'human' as its subject – measures itself' (Kyla Tomkins, 2012, p. 94). The cannibal represents the liminal figure who is not fully human, and not quite fully savage – rather it is a liminality erected on the idea of an excessive appetite; of that which can be eaten, taken in, ingested, interiorised from the other. As a taboo it demarcates the boundaries of the sovereign, autonomous, and independent subject by disfiguring what Parama Roy calls the economy of reciprocity and community. 'It follows that the refusal to partake with or of the other is an important breakdown in or rejection of ethical reciprocity with the other' (Roy, 2010, p. 14). Since one cannot be in-common with the cannibals, establishing control through laws, education, religion, and language appears to be the only reasonable way of co-existing with these imagined, dangerous, indigenous communities.

Christina Sharpe points out that colonial domination needs to be thought as a 'totality'. To understand life under settler colonialism, she suggests, we need to draw on metaphors that capture the totality of antiblack hatred, such as the 'weather' or 'climate' (Sharpe, 2016), which are pervasive, ubiquitous, and omnipresent. In the 'weather' of settler colonialism, black life is erased through narrations of black death, imbued with cruelty and a systemic and systematic animalisation. This pervasive and permeating quality of antiblackness permeability of antiblackness is captured in archival material concerning life in conditions of slavery or colonial exploitation, and in the ubiquitous equation of the black body with that of the cannibal.

Therefore, in this paper, my aim is to contextualise Róheim's theory of maternal cannibalism in the 'Australian weather' to think about what new modes of knowledge about eating, feeding, and being fed, as well as sustenance, can become possible in the colonial context. I ask what was Róheim's psychoanalytic engagement with aboriginal maternal cannibalism (as a manifestation of antiblackness in colonial Australia), and what are the implications of Róheim's psychoanalytic colonial archive for psychoanalysis, today.

To contextualise Róheim's argument, I consider extracts from his anthropologically informed psychoanalytic work where cannibalism is thought to permeate the mother infant relationship. I first discuss cannibalism as a discourse of the colonial Australian state which facilitated the legality of policies of child-abduction, involuntary dislocation, and land dispossession. I then turn to Róheim's lenient view of aboriginal maternal cannibalism, as an acting-out of the mother's ambivalent love for the infant. I propose that despite the apparent (humane) universalisation of cannibalistic-motherly love, Róheim's theory depends on the animalisation of the black mother and on the foreclosure of the lived reality of hunger in a time of ubiquitous antiblackness. In the final part of the chapter, I explore Róheim's psychoanalytic thesis of hunger as excessive, against contemporary accounts of dependence, sustenance, and care. Overall, I propose that eating others, needing to eat, and be eaten emerges in Róheim's work as a practice that interlaces colonial exploitation with social deprivation and unconscious fantasies and cannot be entirely reduced to the sphere of the psyche (symbolic) or the social (external). It has crucial implications for our understanding of the relationship between psychoanalysis and colonialism.

'Every one... killed and ate her new-born baby': Maternal Cannibalism as a Discourse of the Colonial State

When Géza Róheim arrived in Central Australia at the end of February 1929, the existence of maternal infanticide and cannibalism was a common belief amongst the settlers and the missionaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Hermannsburg. In *White Mother to a Dark Race* (2009), historian Margaret Jacobs points to a deliberate misrepresentation of aboriginal motherhood as cruel, inadequate, or aberrant, endorsed by Australian conservative women's groups. The 'Maternalists' were a white, middle-class women's group seeking to establish 'the nuclear patriarchal family ideal', which under the guise of the 'child savers' sought to create a new class of child labourers by removing them from their aboriginal, impoverished parents

and training them for domestic work – also known as the ‘stolen generations’ (Jacobs, 2009, p. 125). Amongst the Maternalists accusations of maternal infanticide and cannibalism were also used to justify child-removal policies, and to consolidate the conflict between white and black mothers in racial terms. Jessie Litchfield, a prominent settler, journalist, and author of *Far North Memories* (1930) proposed that Aboriginal women ‘invariably killed at birth, to be eaten at cannibal feasts’ children from mixed ethnic backgrounds’ (Litchfield quoted in Jacobs, 2009, p. 125). These children, synonymous with the sexual violence of white colonialists, became the cannibalised children embodying how the future of colonial nationhood was in jeopardy due to Aboriginal motherhood.

Rumours of aboriginal maternal cannibalism were further disseminated from the work of an Irish journalist, and later ‘honorary protector of Aborigines’ (1912), Daisy Bates (also Róheim’s primary source). Bates had lived amongst various aboriginal tribes in Australia and maintained a column in Australian newspapers entitled ‘My native and I’. In 1930, Bates collected broken bones and skulls which she believed were the remnants of a cannibalistic feast and sent them for investigation to the University of Adelaide (Jacobs, 2009, p.124). J.B. Cleland, a Professor of Pathology claimed that ‘she was misled by informants’ and the investigation showed that the bones were ‘undoubtedly those of a domestic cat’ (Jacobs, 2009, p.124). Despite her ridiculing, she procured accusations of indigenous infanticide and cannibalism in an attempt to create ‘sensational portrayals of poor Aboriginal mothering’ (Jacobs, 2009, p. 124). Bates states that she claimed to have encountered mothers killing and eating their babies as early as 1900 (Reece, 2007, p. 86). In 1911, she was photographed with nine aboriginal women at Peak Hill, and the picture’s caption read ‘every one... killed and ate her new-born baby, sharing it with every other woman in her group’ (Reece, 2007, p. 87). As Saidiya Hartman points out about photos in the context of colonial exploitation and slavery, they do not seek to ‘reproduce or document the past’. Instead, photos are deployed to designate ‘a world in which blackness too often translated into “no human involved”.’ (Hartman, 2006, p.132)

Yet, aboriginal cannibalism was not only assumed to be evidence of a subhuman, savage motherhood. As Giordanno Nanni notes in his book *The Colonisation of Time* (2012), food constituted a site of misunderstanding, with the settlers dismissing accounts of aboriginal organisation of resources. The lack of an established timetable with regards to agriculture and hunting – a regularity which ordered European time – fed into exaggerated accounts of

infanticide and cannibalism as a means for subsistence. Failing to perceive aboriginal time and attributing to aboriginals ‘an erratic and haphazard timetable’, Nanni argues, these extreme accusations were seen as ‘a consequence of their failure to plan for the future’ (Nanni, 2012, p. 78). Because the aboriginal sense of chronology was oriented around nature (the seasons, the moon, the stars), Europeans considered their sense of time irregular and unreliable leading to predictable mismanagement of resources which thrust the aboriginals towards ‘savage’ solutions, such as infanticide and cannibalism (ibid). Therefore, the discourse of infanticide and cannibalism became available as a discourse for use by the colonial state in its regulation of aboriginal family, labour, time, and its imposition of child-abduction policies. It is in this context that Róheim arrived in Adelaide in January 1929.

Upon his arrival, Róheim and his wife, Illona, were welcomed by the protector of Aborigines Herbert Basedow, before travelling to Central Australia and the Lutheran Mission of Hermannsburg where they stayed for ten months. In 1929, Alice Springs, the area around the Hermannsburg Mission was entering the third year of drought (1926-1930) which had caused food resources to shrink – and ‘reduced the mission’s rations to little more than “flour soup” and treacle’, while mice, grasshoppers and small birds were used by the mission as alternatives for meat (Austin-Broos, 2009, p. 62-63). Infant mortality skyrocketed to 85% – ‘forty-nine children under school age died, thirty of drought related causes’ (ibid). The professor of Pathology and President of the Royal Society of South Australia (1927-1928) J.B. Cleland diagnosed the cause of deaths as linked with scurvy. The Hermannsburg mission received cases of citrus and was advised to expand the growth of vegetables. The land previously used as a hunting ground for the Arrente was taken up for grazing, substantially limiting the aboriginal resources for food. Róheim describes the dispossession of aboriginal land, in the introduction of his ‘Psychoanalysis of Primitive Types’. ‘The Aranda [...] were gathered round the Lutheran Mission in Hermannsburg, as the old hunting territory of the tribe had been wholly occupied by the whites’ (Róheim, 1932, p. 3). Additionally, Róheim notes how neighbouring tribes like the Luritja (about one hundred people) ‘were assembled there that year, partly owing to the extraordinary drought, partly on account of Government dispositions’ (Róheim, 1932, p. 3). At the same time, an aboriginal living wage was, at the time, unthinkable (Austin-Broos, 2009, p. 63). I link this ecological disaster with what Sharpe describes as the ‘weather’ and its ability to produce new ecologies. The only certainty, Sharpe writes, ‘is the weather that produces a pervasive climate of anti-blackness’ and pushes always toward Black death (Sharpe, 2016, p. 106). This is evident from the way in which government was pushing groups like the Luritja

and Pintupi away from heavy drinking white, railway communities (Austin-Broos, p. 64) and near Hermannsburg, without making adequate provisions for the resources the migrated communities required.

Géza Róheim Amongst the Cannibals

Born in Budapest in a wealthy, Jewish family Róheim discovered psychoanalysis through Freud's work on totemism, as an anthropology and geography student in Germany. He trained as a psychoanalyst in the Budapest Institute of Psychoanalysis, and was analysed by Sándor Ferenczi (1915-16), whilst he worked with Michael and Alice Bálint, and Melanie Klein. Ferenczi endorsed the analyst's intuitive curiosity, and through his anti-authoritarian stance encouraged trainee analysts to experiment with their analytic technique (Mészáros, 1998, p. 210). This analytic training stimulated Róheim to devote his career to the development of the field of 'psychoanalytic anthropology', stressing the potency of psychoanalytic thought in the study of culture, child-rearing practices, and national identity. As an anthropologist, Róheim was dissatisfied with the way cultures were studied by his contemporaries. If functionalism (Malinowski's school) proposed that artefacts made sense only contextually, within a given culture, and diffusionists looked at the evolution of cultures historically, Róheim's position affirmed that the manifestations of the unconscious were identical across all cultures (Robinson, 1972). In other words, Róheim introduced a third dimension to the study of cultures: that of the psychological meaning of the artefact, which was regarded as universal. After receiving the International Literary Prize for Applied Psycho-Analysis, awarded by Freud in 1925, in 1929 he secured funding from Marie Bonaparte, and, supported by Freud, Ferenczi and Vilma Kovacs, managed to conduct a series of fieldwork investigations with local groups in Central Australia, Somalia, Papua New Guinea, and Arizona, thus taking psychoanalysis outside the clinic.

During his stay in Central Australia Róheim came into contact with the Arrente and the Luritja, who were staying near the Hermannsburg mission, as well as with so-called 'desert' groups, like the Pitchentara (or Pitjentara), Pindupi and others. While a vast amount of his fieldwork notes were included in the 1932 publication *Psycho-analysis of Primitive Cultural Types*, Róheim kept revising material from his psychoanalytic ethnography in Australia in *The Riddle of the Sphinx* (1934), *The Origin and Function of Culture* (1943), and *Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (1968[1950]) and *Magic and Schizophrenia* (1954).

Rather curiously in this environment of prevailing dispossession Róheim found the aboriginal child lacking in anxiety. He regarded this as a direct consequence of unperturbed mothering. The Central Australian aboriginal is 'happy', 'unneurotic', and does not experience anxiety. Psychoanalytically speaking an 'oral optimist[s]' (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 59). The aboriginal mothers were described as 'yielding', 'good and non-resisting,' minimising the frustration of their children. Crucially, the aboriginal mother was said to achieve this by ensuring she always available to feed the (male) child: '[H]e can always get the nipple when he wants it and he is never weaned until he weans himself' (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 68). A 'state of communal motherhood guarantees' that the child will not starve if the mother is not available or has no milk. Access to the breast was identified by Róheim as the reason why children do not experience deprivation and develop what he saw as a 'healthy foundation of narcissism' (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 71). The relation to the mother (and the nipple) became, for Róheim, the basis of the development of the ego and, in his eyes, it determined the child's resilience to frustrations from the external environment – anxiety and neurosis.

Echoing Klein's ideas around the relation to the good and the absent (bad) breast,¹ Róheim regarded infantile anxiety as 'centered around object loss and *food trouble*' (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 72). This is because breast-feeding fosters the 'incorporation of the mother or the identification with the mother,' (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 73) which strengthens the ego and prepares the child to protect himself against the trauma of separation from her. Róheim offers an account of what happens during breast-feeding which precedes Klein's distinction of the maternal object, but nonetheless, pivots away from a Freudian grammar and towards the emerging object relations tradition. He states 'the internalized object is really [...] the internalized body contents of the mother' (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 74). Therefore, through a non-frustrating breast-feeding the aboriginal child can uninterruptedly internalise the body contents of the mother; her embodied (bodily) unconscious.

In a twist which defines the entirety of Róheim's psychoanalytic approach, he attributes the optimum breast-feeding situation both to an innate maternal yieldingness, but more importantly to a social organisation of breast-feeding (the 'communal motherhood') which mitigates

¹ While the development of the link between deprivation and orality can be traced back to Klein's early papers on *The Psychological Principles of Infant Analysis* (1927) and the *Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict* (1928), it is in the 1930s that Klein introduces the concept of the 'part object' and the idea of splitting of the maternal breast into good and bad (See Klein, 1935, 1940).

frustration and lessens feelings of deprivation. Róheim does not suggest that no frustration is experienced. Rather, he considers how the cultural organisation of motherhood, and child-led weaning can make the effects of frustration less obvious. Róheim was not saying that aboriginal children were happy because they did not experience any frustrations – after all, ‘a minimal degree of [...] frustration’ is inevitable (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 75), but because their society (and their mothers in particular) were organised in a way that allowed limited space for frustration.² Arguably, his argument presents an indirect criticism of Western mothering methods ‘with its schedules for feeding the baby and enforced training’ (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 76), convincingly mapped by Bar-Haim (2021). Indeed the medicalisation of breast-feeding during the interwar period meant that mothers (especially middle-class ones) were encouraged to follow expert guidance and ensure that they were ‘feeding around the clock’. For example, Katharina Rowold has shown how the influential ‘Truby King method’ (named by the New Zealand doctor Frederic Truby King) with its emphasis on discipline, regularity, and the routinisation of breast-feeding, dictated the importance of ensuring that infant were neither overfed, nor underfed. Getting the feeding exactly right was the precondition for raising healthy, thriving non-spoilt children in the West (Rowold, 2019).

Adjacent to this divide between the controlled Western mothering and the yielding aboriginal one, is a second divide this time within aboriginal motherhood. To the image of the pliant aboriginal mother, Róheim juxtaposes the well-established colonial mythology of the cannibal mother. The mother is not only ‘unambivalently good’, he writes just as ‘the son [is not] as generous as it might seem’ (Róheim, 1932, p. 80). Tankai, the wife of Pukutiwara – a sorcerer of the tribe Pitchentara and one of Róheim’s primary informants, had ‘killed four of her children and each had been eaten with one of their brothers’ (Róheim, 1932, p. 80). With a hint of disbelief, Róheim clarifies that ‘Urukula, Jankitji, Aldinga and a fourth child’, who he had observed and played with for hours, ‘had each of them eaten one of their little brothers or sisters’. The answer Tankai and other women came up with, when ‘questioned about this custom’ was ‘hunger’ or ‘flesh hunger’ (Roheim, 1932, p. 80). Róheim the anthropologist was

² Influences of Róheim’s thinking can be identified in the work of Paul and Goldy Parin, who, alongside Fritz Morgenthau conducted fieldwork with the ethnic group Dogon of Mali, in Africa, in the 1960s. Their interest in the comparative study of cultures, and the effect of child-rearing practices on the amount and type of anxiety felt by adult individuals, can be traced - albeit, precariously - back to Róheim. This ‘trio’ of analysts, as they are often described, were friendly with Georges Devereux, a Hungarian French psychoanalyst-anthropologist who coined the term ‘ethnopschoanalysis’, and who was Róheim’s analysand. For a comprehensive account of the clinical and socio-political contribution of ‘ethnopschoanalysis’ see: Herzog, 2017.

well-versed in nineteenth-century colonial anthropology which ushered into the psychoanalytic imaginary the absurd myth of the all-devouring (racial) other.³ Róheim the psychoanalyst, on the other hand, was supplied with the idea that cannibalism was indeed an unconscious (universal) wish aimed at the Oedipal father, in accordance with Freud's myth of the primal horde. Still, in a rather profound perception of hunger solely as a psychological phenomenon, Róheim reached the conclusion that maternal cannibalism was actually a concrete manifestation of the loving mother's visceral 'oral ambivalence'. 'The mother loves (or hates) her child so vehemently that she eats it.' The actuality of hunger as a lack of access to resources – a direct result of colonial governance – is bypassed, and the physicality of hunger overshadowed by its symbolic representation, transforming cannibalism into the epitome of maternal desire.

Discussing the realities of life in conditions of antiblackness, Sharpe introduces the story of Margaret Garner – upon whom the character of Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is based. The twenty-two-year-old pregnant Margaret manages to escape from the plantation where she was enslaved; with her are her four children, her husband, and his parents. She is recaptured and 'in her attempt to deny ownership to those who would claim her and her children as property' she succeeds in killing her daughter (Sharpe, 2016, p. 104). Sharpe recounts how Margaret is recaptured, tried as a fugitive slave, and sent to New Orleans 'a place from which almost no enslaved people managed to escape' (Sharpe, 2016, p. 104). Margaret boards on the *Henry Lewis* with her baby daughter and husband. In the crowded river, the *Henry Lewis* collides with another boat and Margaret's daughter drowns or is jumped or thrown in the water. Margaret survives. For Sharpe the totality of antiblackness forces the possibility of thinking of infanticide as care – the mother that ensures the child will not have to experience what the mother knows. As Edwidge Danticat, whom Sharpe quotes, states: 'The past is full of examples when our foremothers and forefathers showed such deep trust in the sea that they would jump off slave ships and let the waves embrace them. They too believe that the sea was the beginning and the end of all things' (Danticat, 1996, quoted in Sharpe, 2016, p. 105). For Sharpe infanticide, within the archive of slavery, represents an 'impossible possibility' that must be hidden from the future generations. The mother does not want the daughter to know what she has already

³ For a detailed discussion of the evolutionary dogma of Victorian anthropology cementing modern ideas of racial hierarchy see Stocking, 1971, 1987.. For an account of how the Western ethnographic imaginary construed and sustained the mythology of cannibals in remote islands, demarcating the boundaries of the European Empires see: Obeyesekere, 2005. Last, for a discussion on the pervasiveness of racism in Victorian humanitarian projects, and the discourse of taming wilds see: Bratlinger, 2011.

experienced. When read contrapuntally, Margaret's infanticide discloses something different about the possibilities faced by the Aboriginal Australian mothers than Róheim's account allows, and in a way, it allows us to witness the psychoanalytic disavowal of the deadliness of colonial life.

In Róheim's ethnography maternal desire was organised around the instinctive wish to devour an infant. Consequently, animalistic appetites were restrained either through the (white) male gaze or through cultural prohibition. For example, he states that a child without a name, was in greater danger than one that had received a name (Róheim, 1968, p. 60). Equally, Róheim came across informants who promulgated stories aimed at rewriting aboriginal living in a way more palatable for the white gaze.

'[Ikintapi] remembered how Tjintjewara's mother killed her child and gave it to Tjintjewara to eat. This much the old woman also admitted but she denied that she actually ate the infant. She said that her father appeared on the scene of action, beat her mother and herself, and took the roasted baby from her. Probably she invented this story because she knew that white men do not approve of eating sisters' (Róheim, 1932, p. 61).

It is clearly very hard to imagine what Ikintapi might have said that was translated in the psychoanalytic fabulation of a (reverse) Oedipal scene scene – the mother conspiring with the Tjintjewara to devour the 'roasted baby', the father's intervention serving the violence of the colonial, 'civilising' gaze. In his 1948 paper, *The Thread of Life*, Róheim states that across many European and non-European cultures, the placenta and the umbilical cord are considered as the magical doubles of the child, which '[...] symbolize the dual union of infant and mother, the tie that unites mother and child' (Róheim, 1948, p. 477). Freud, on the contrary, had taken the idea of the placenta further making a parallel with the mythological representation of the weaker twin. In a 1911 letter to Jung, Freud suggests that the reason behind the motif of unequal pairs of male characters in literature and myths (Don Quixote and Sancho Panza ('literally paunch'), Dioskouroi, Remus and Romulus is the representation of a man's libido (the noble part versus the sensual, crude part), and therefore the split subject. Citing Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Freud states to Jung that 'one can read that among many primitive peoples the afterbirth is called brother (sister) or twin, and treated accordingly, that is, fed and taken care of, which of course cannot go on for very long' (Freud, 1911, p. 448-449).

We might try to speculate why R  heim does not associate the idea of ‘eating sisters’ with placentophagy. After all, our speculations cannot be much wilder than R  heim’s. In his 1947 introduction to the edited volume on ‘Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences’ R  heim suggests that to effectively analyse ethnographic material one must ‘accept psychoanalysis without any reservations’ (R  heim, 1947, p. 13-14) – which can only be achieved through a hands-on clinical experience not only of having been analysed but having undergone a psychoanalytic training as well. ‘Without this practice nobody can acquire real skill in deep interpretation and without constant contact with the unconscious we are likely to repress the results of our own analysis and resistance will gradually get the upper hand’ (R  heim, 1947, p. 32-33). Therefore, this unusual expansion of the clinic magnifies the psychoanalytic reliance on the ‘constant contact with the unconscious’ which, comes at the expense of registering the actuality of life in antiblackness. As Fanon noted, regarding the wildness of psychoanalytic interpretations, albeit in the context of the representation of the Algerian anti-colonial war in dreams, ‘the rifle of the Senegalese soldier is not a penis but a genuine rifle, model Lebel 1916’ (Fanon, 1986 [1952], p. 106). At a time of extreme famine, illness, and dispossession, R  heim’s focus is not on how the colonial conditions of life-in-death are filtered or distorted by unconscious fantasy – on the part of the coloniser as well as the colonised – but instead, he is construing a psychologising account which rejects the external world and its impact on psychic life. Instead, R  heim’s theory vindicates the psychoanalytic doctrine which assumes the existence of an autonomous (and sealed) internal world. As Jacqueline Rose suggests the colonial context does not thwart psychoanalysis. Quite the contrary. Psychoanalysis can take place precisely because the totality of colonial antiblackness can be foreclosed – this is ‘the ruse of psychoanalysis’ (Rose, 1998, p. 340).

So far, I have discussed R  heim’s theory of aboriginal maternal cannibalism focusing on the inherent contradiction of his psychological explanation: maternal cannibalism is not unnatural (after all it is the maternal desire par excellence), it does not psychologically injure aboriginal children, which appear to be lacking anxiety. I have offered three alternative explanations to R  heim’s accounts of cannibalism, which sidestep the essential animalisation of the (black) maternal: (a) he mistook placentophagy for infant cannibalism; (b) he disregarded cannibalism as a desperate solution to famine, and denied the possibility of infanticide as a protest against the unliveability of life under settled colonialism; (c) he was being playfully misled and fed sensational stories by his informants who sought to capture the attention of the ‘disapproving white man’. Keeping in mind the unshakeable ideology of the cannibalistic aboriginal mother,

I would now like to reread Róheim's theory of aboriginal motherhood as an archive, which holds an account of the lives of those whom the colonial state 'refuse[d] to grant life' (Sharpe, 2016). Returning to Sharpe's text, I am interested in whether anything survives from the psychologization of the hungry aboriginal maternal about our need to eat, be fed, and nurtured both by maternal figures, and maternal structures.

Mothers, Eaten

In this archive of black death, Róheim describes a sustained, maternal commitment to care in the form of collective breast-feeding:

No woman who has milk or even merely a breast to play with will refuse a child, and thus not only is frustration unknown but the child starts life in a happy state of communal motherhood. He can always get the nipple when he wants it and he is never weaned until he weans himself. There is no sudden transition from the mother's milk to other food, but gradually he will not desire the milk any more. (Róheim, 1932, p. 75).

This would suggest a community functioning in terms of what Judith Butler describes as 'social interdependency' – a form of social organisation which ensures that resources are shared equally and seeks 'to achieve equal conditions of livability' (Butler, 2021, p. 17). In the face of a colonial past of dispossession and death, which disavows interdependency on the natural environment, and the personhood and grievability of the lives of those who are not raced 'white', in Róheim's texts the task of care is spread in the community in a way that exceeds the nuclear family (as the organising unit of the white, patriarchal society). Thought this way, Róheim's aboriginal child is resourceful in the sense that it knows its period of dependency will not last forever, since communal being depends on our active caring towards others. For example, Róheim notes 'In the Central Australian desert, a child begins to seek his own food when he is four or five, and by the time he is twelve he is economically self-supporting' (Róheim, 1934, p. 211).

In this reading of communal motherhood, I move away from well-established criticisms highlighting the sheer (and brutal) psychologising in Róheim's work laying out the fundamentals of the colonisation of psychoanalysis. These criticisms emphasise Róheim's account of the happy native in relation to a latency period as a 'play period' which does not

demand the repression of sexuality, but is based on the un-sublimated expression of it, blurring – or rather effectively erasing – the boundaries between “‘life” and “play”” (Bar-Haim, 2021, p. 94). This kind of child-rearing results in the development of a kinder super-ego, which makes the native subject less anxious, less depressed and ‘much more capable of dealing with difficulties in life’ (Bar-Haim, 2021, p. 94). However, using cannibalism and infanticide – as a discourse of the colonial state – as the entry point to Róheim’s psychoanalytic ethnography allows us to flesh out the psychosocial dimension of his work, through his emphasis on dependency, food, and feeding, as well as the fantasies permeating the mother-infant dyad.

Róheim formulates his psychoanalytic theory based on the idea of the child’s dependency on its carers. He attributes the emergence and dissemination of culture to a collective trauma occurring during ‘the period of intimate association between parents and children’ (Róheim, 1934, p. 213). Róheim, like Freud, believed that what distinguishes humans from animals is the prolonged period of dependency owed to our ‘biological helplessness’ (Róheim, 1968[1950], p. 74, p. 409). While identifying ‘no shortage of libidinal dangers in the form of seductions and primal scenes’ amongst animals (Róheim, 1934, p. 208), he maintains the existence of a repressive mechanism which makes fixations endure for longer, and ‘the tendency of past libidinal excitement to become permanent [...] to be created’ (Róheim, 1934, p. 209). Róheim thus regards the period of infancy as traumatic, and central for psychological development, but also for society too. Inasmuch as these early traumata differ (due to regional variations in child-rearing practices, the proximity of adults and children), communities, groups, and societies are bound to differ as well. Each one of these social structures, Róheim tells us, responds to the shared unconscious anxieties of its members:

‘individual cultures can be derived from typical infantile traumata, and that culture in general (everything which differentiates man from the lower animals) is a consequence of infantile experience’ (Róheim, 1934, p. 216)

But what is traumatic about infantile dependency? This is a psychological question, though also a social one. Firstly, it is the ‘decisive differences between infantile and adult sexuality’ (Róheim, 1934, p. 205). Quoting Michael Balint, Róheim notes ‘[T]he undeveloped human being is not yet capable of end-pleasure’. Because contact with parents involve an augmented amount of ‘libido quantities’ that the child is ‘unable to absorb’, repression and other defence mechanisms’ are activated forming the basis of the infantile unconscious (ibid). Yet, besides

this asymmetrical sexual maturity, which is closer to a Ferenczian emphasis on seduction as the calling into being of the unconscious, Róheim adds the factor of helplessness in response to the primal scene.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud assumed an inherent capacity for guilt owing to the transgenerational transmission of the violence of the primal crime – the murder and cannibalisation of the primordial father (Freud, 1913). From a Freudian perspective, the killing of someone because he is hated, despite the fact that he is also loved, becomes a traumatic memory, generating guilt that sustains the prohibition of killing in fantasy. We could therefore say that, for Freud, the social is permeated by the unconscious knowledge of the wish to kill the ambivalent object in fantasy, and the accompanying need to sublimate or work through of violence (which of course, in the colonial state sounds, at best, like an irony). To Freud's scene of the primal crime, Róheim adds the brothers' memory of not being able to kill the authoritative father as children. 'In their revolt they realized what they could not do as infants' (Róheim, 1934, p. 210). This condition of helplessness galvanised by dependence on the older generation (and its violence) lies at the heart of Róheim's theorisation of the social. Judith Butler writes:

'We all start by being given over – a situation both passive and animating. That's what happens when a child is born: someone gives the child over to someone else. We are, from the start, handled against our will in part because the will is in the process of being formed. [...] Being handed over against one's will is not always a beautiful scene.' (Butler, 2020, p. 49)

This would suggest that dependency is traumatic because we find ourselves at the mercy and the ethics of the other, who may be caring and thoughtful, or careless and violent, but whom, according to Butler, we are not yet ready to understand – our will still being in the process of being formed.

Another reason why this dependency is experienced as traumatic has to do with the child's experience of neediness, which through projection transforms the mother into a cannibalistic monster. Akin to Klein's description of the devouring breast as a product of the child's own unconscious wish to devour it, Róheim proposes that the child 'projects its aggression on to the person who was the object of aggression, and so forms the concept of the cannibalistic mother and of the cannibalistic parents' (Róheim, 1934, p. 39). Crucially, though, he adds 'there is an element of truth in this projection [...] since Australian parents actually do eat their children'

(ibid). Yet, ‘this habit is now seen to be more the effect than the cause of the belief in cannibalistic demons’ (ibid). In other words, Róheim *also* views the practice of maternal cannibalism not only as a projection of the mother’s cannibalistic impulse onto the child, but as amplified by the child’s helpless dependence on the mother, and in particular by the child’s Oedipal anxieties of rejection. Róheim’s Oedipal child is stubbornly attached to the knowledge, or better to the disavowal, engendered by the primal scene:

The little boy cannot cope with the impulses which his mother excites in him, and being injured in his masculine pride when she seems to refuse him, he turns her into a cannibalistic demon. She becomes the mystical and much-desired *alkarintja* [...] whose vagina is charged with deadly magic and who brings death to man.’ (Róheim, 1934, p. 32)

The primal scene’s mother is the rejecting mother, who is then imagined to be a half-human cannibalistic monster with devouring genitalia (the *alkarintja*). The dependence on the mother for food and the subsequent rejection by her lie at the heart of the hatred against her – a mother cannot and must not, after all, have possession over her own pleasure and sexuality – but, even more her sexuality *is* deadly. Róheim’s description of the aboriginal child’s primal scene is indicative: the mother gets up in the night and does something with a man whereby she becomes a hostile and cannibalistic being in the eyes of the child’ (Róheim, 1934, p. 39).

Yet, although Róheim encounters several myths about mothers and fathers as cannibalistic monsters which he interprets in relation to the child’s Oedipal wishes, he emphasises the aboriginal child’s ability to engage with the myths as parental doubles and separate the imaginary from the real object. A similar point is made by Bruno Bettelheim in his discussion of the story of Hansel and Gretel, as told by the Grimm brothers. Orality is ubiquitous in the fairy tale – from the parents who in not being able to feed the children plot to abandon them in the forest, to Hansel and Gretel’s savouring of the witch’s gingerbread house, to the witch’s plans to cannibalise the captive children, and finally, to the achieved capacity for appetite reservation and for managing’s one’s own violent, cannibalistic gluttony. Through eating the gingerbread house and destroying an evil mother children come to terms with the ordinarily good mother, inside the destructive one. Bettelheim suggests that Hansel and Gretel’s journey in the forest, with its dangers and excitements, stands as a metaphor for the managing of orality,

separateness, and independence. The fairy tale, in other words, becomes the food for thought that prompts the children to seek more real and realistic ways of relating to their parents.⁴

Róheim is equally preoccupied with how the infantile trauma of helplessness and dependency is worked through. Ferenczi, whom he quotes, proposed that there is no ‘shock or fright’ without ‘some signs of a fission in the personality’ (Róheim, 1934, p. 211). For psychoanalysis, trauma leads to an (inevitable) wish to return to a ‘pretraumatic bliss’. Crucially, for Ferenczi this ordinary, infantile trauma can, through the mechanism of identification, also lead to a ‘quasi-miraculous growth of new capacities’ (ibid), which Róheim describes as a ‘traumatic progression, or precocity, in development’ (ibid). Infantile helplessness and dependency therefore, does not condemn the individual to passivity, due to the asynchronicity between the achievement of biological dependency and psychological development. More crucially, Róheim praises the child’s ability to be sovereign yet dependent, and to actualise that which they want to happen in a non-psychotic, non-hallucinatory way. In his posthumously published work *Magic and Schizophrenia*, Róheim cements this idea through his concept of the ‘magic principle’ as a third term between the hallucinatory thinking of the pleasure principle, and the rigidity and unchangeability of the reality principle. Unlike the idea of the ‘omnipotence of thought’ the magic principle appears to be a form of freedom emerging from the belief in our potency to achieve, pulling us away from the traumatic condition of helplessness and frustration of our infancy:

‘Magic [...] is our great reservoir of strength against frustration and defeat and against the superego. While the magical omnipotence fantasy of the child means growing up, magic in the hands of an adult means a regression to an infantile fantasy’. (Róheim, 1954, p. 45).

The way in which this quotation echoes Winnicott’s transitional phenomena is quite profound. Based on a paper delivered at the British Psychoanalytic Society in 1951, Winnicott’s seminal 1954 paper introduces transitional phenomena as ‘an intermediate area of experience’, through which the infant negotiates the boundaries between the inside, the outside, and the border.

⁴ Bettelheim writes: [Inheriting the witch’s jewels] suggests that as the children transcend their oral anxiety, and free themselves of relying on oral satisfaction for security, they can also free themselves of the image of the threatening mother—the witch—and rediscover the good parents, whose greater wisdom—the shared jewels—then benefit all.’ (Bettelheim, 2010[1975], p. 250)

Winnicott describes a process by which the infant produces or adopts an object and uses it to ‘distinguish’ – to use Winnicott’s word – between what lies inside the infant, and the objects existing outside and independent of it. For Róheim, the use of magic in adulthood is regarded as regression. For Winnicott too the illusion of the transitional object is only allowed in infancy, and crucially, in art and religion too. Oscillating between psychoanalytic conservatism, and a more subtle, psychoanalytic radicalism, Winnicott suggests that for the believer and the mad, the sharp distinction between inside and outside is simply untenable. In Christianity, Winnicott writes, the holy sacrament is simultaneously the body of Jesus Christ and a substitute of it. And continues: ‘A schizoid patient asked me, after Christmas, had I enjoyed eating her at the feast? And then, had I really eaten her or only in fantasy? I knew that she could not be satisfied with either alternative. Her split needed the double answer’ (Winnicott, 1954, p. 92). For those for whom eating is not, simply, a concrete process of sustenance, transitional phenomena cannot be relegated to infant life. But I would also like to draw attention to Winnicott’s (derogatory) reference to the patient’s ‘split’ and to question whether it is possible to perceive it not as a schism in need of overcoming, but as an awareness of the inherent split in us all.

For Róheim, the Central Australian Aboriginal culture permits a fluid, developmental oscillation, which against the terrifying realities of ecological, social adversities, make him convinced of the aboriginal child’s capacity to survive. In a most likely phantasmic memory Róheim recalls the Pitjantara children, ‘who at the age of eight or ten went roaming about the desert and were practically self-supporting’. Their technical mastery of survival techniques is evidence of children as ‘really self-reliant and grown up’ (Róheim, 1954, p. 51). I want to suggest that we can read Róheim’s account as construing an image of a community, which despite its foreclosed future, despite its proximity to dehumanising, colonial violence, despite its uncaring handling by the colonial state, maintains an awareness of this ‘split’ enabling the aboriginal child to survive, not only physically but also psychically. Is this an instance of psychoanalytic (cruel) optimism at the service of an anti-colonial survival?

Cannibalism for our Times

The fabulation of cannibalism in colonial Australia and Róheim’s productive engagement with it generates a series of questions around living, surviving, killing, and dying that have the (black) maternal at its centre. The black maternal is there to passively breast-feed or actively devour. In her chapter on ‘Eating the Mother’, Irina Aristarkhova highlights how intimately

linked cannibalism is with survival. As she puts it, '*human life is a possibility realised only by eating the mother*' (Aristarkhova, 2021, p. 46, emphasis in the original). Aristarkhova suggests that the role of the mother as food is purposefully omitted from various forms of production and reproduction because it reminds us that we all start as cannibals, because we eat our mothers – perhaps in more ways than one. For Aristarkhova it is impossible to understand the self ontologically, without accounting for the materiality of hunger as an experience that is always excessive and is founded upon an act of cannibalisation of the mother, for which all other eating becomes a substitute. More importantly, hunger exposes how fraught relationality or being-with-others is, by persistently exposing them to the dangers of appropriation and annihilation, but also of love and tenderness.

The loving aspect of the cannibalisation of the mother is beautifully and poetically reflected in a dream from Sara Suleri's memoir *Meatless Days* (1989):

A blue van drove up: I noticed it was a refrigerated car and my father was inside it. He came to tell me that we must put my mother in her coffin, and he opened the blue hatch of the van to reach inside, where it was very cold. What I found were hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane, and each of them felt like Mamma, in some odd way. It was my task to carry those flanks across the street and to fit them into the coffin at the other side of the road, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Although my dream will not let me recall how many trips I made, I know my hands felt cold. Then, when my father's back was turned, I found myself engaged in rapid theft – for the sake of Ifat and Shahid and Tillat and all of us, I stole away a portion of the body. It was a piece of her foot I found, a small bone like a knuckle, which I quickly hid inside my mouth, under my tongue. Then I and the dream dissolved, into an extremity of tenderness. (Suleri, 1989, p. 44)

The dream evokes a sense of offering warmth to the mother's cold, refrigerated, dead body, possessing it, through a deviant gesture of cannibalism. The gesture is done secretly and for the sake of the siblings, the other members who have also feasted on this now fragmented, maternal body. The knuckle – a bone to be suckled without getting consumed is stolen and a part of the (now dead) maternal body is held warm inside the mouth – where, in words echoing Erica Jong, the cannibalistic corruption first began. Suleri's dream is about love and memory, and about a mother who is being eaten (again) as part of the daughter's mourning process. The dream exemplifies the vexed problem of cannibalism: whilst in Western modernity it has been

the byword of monstrosity and has been implicated in colonialisation and an economy of a devouring obliteration of the ‘other’, psychoanalytically speaking it is very intimately linked with the ambivalences of love.

Nonetheless, considering antiblackness as a total situation what seems to be emerging is that the visceral hunger for the mother is equally, powerfully implicated in the animalisation of the (black) maternal. Róheim’s case study highlights this perspective exposing how the black maternal is embedded in an economy of consumption and appropriation of life, whilst at the same time simultaneously idealised as passively offering an endless, blissful experience of breast-feeding. The myth of the cannibalistic maternal becomes through Róheim engrained and embedded in psychoanalytic imagination, perpetuating a form of epistemic violence which, as Jakiyya Iman Jackson argues, represents blackness as ‘infinitely malleable’. Jackson continues ‘blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially “everything and nothing” at the register of ontology’ (Jackson, 2020, p. 19).

In Róheim’s work this ‘everything and nothing’ of blackness is best reflected in the production of the black maternal as a canvas upon which an ideological view of motherhood is painted. The unresolved contradiction in his theory – namely, the argument for non-anxious children raised by cannibalistic mothers – firstly captures how the black body can be moulded and adjusted in ways that sustain psychoanalytic truths: the unchallenged belief in savage populations, and the wish or conviction that despite their savagery, an idealised capacity for care prevails. While I do not wish to discredit the apparent humanism of this argument, which makes a potent contribution to the discourse of an animalised blackness, I still maintain the view that it is not enough in terms of challenging the complicity of psychoanalysis in the co-production of epistemic racial violence. Moreover, Róheim’s unresolved contradiction equally captures how strongly embedded eating is in the colonial imaginary, co-fabricating the climate of antiblackness. Parama Roy convincingly discusses food and eating in the context of empire, proposing that they are not just implicated, ‘they are not, or not only, the by-products of these processes of historical and epistemic overhaul; they are also fundamentally constitutive of it, at the level of ideas, practices, figures, and debates/conflicts’ (Roy, 2010, p. 193). Consuming, eating, and needing to be nurtured are expelled from the white imaginary and are spat upon, or even vomited on the black maternal. This is a point for our understanding of antiblackness, but it is a point for psychoanalysis too, for how psychoanalysis becomes complicit in the climate of antiblackness.

But perhaps there is another way of thinking about Róheim's unresolved contradiction and his emphasis on the aboriginal child's capacity to survive without debilitating anxiety. Róheim's optimism is premised on the idea that survival is possible despite the violence done to us by those responsible for our care. What he leaves us with is a conviction that despite an omnipresent colonial, annihilating matrix, collectivising care as part of our being-in-common is an antidote in a social world of ecological crises, socio-political impoverishment, and deprivation. Risking an idealisation of collective care here, perhaps we could argue that Róheim's work highlights our individual responsibility to feed the other – quite literally, to allow ourselves to be eaten – as an essential part of being-in-common and being-with-others, which does not demonise our inherent dependence on others for survival.

I have been suggesting throughout this paper that the case of Géza Róheim's psychoanalytic fieldwork in Central Australia exemplifies an unresolved contradiction, which tells us something important about the im/possibilities of psychoanalytic encounters in 'the climate of antiblackness'. Evidently, some might oppose the choice to unearth Róheim's relatively unknown work to think about psychoanalysis in the colonies. Róheim, they might argue, belongs to the ash heap of psychoanalytic history – his attempt to dissect the aboriginal unconscious represents a Freudian ambition and preoccupation with universalism galvanised by an urge to establish psychoanalysis as a legitimate theory of the (universal) subject, but with little theoretical currency. Yet, I think that it is particularly these failures to grasp the black maternal contextually that demonstrate the nuances and the perils of the psychoanalytic imagination in times of anti-blackness. Albeit historically marginalised and forgotten, Róheim's project brings to the fore ideas around the trope of the cannibal, concealed from the main narratives of psychoanalytic subjectivity. Arguing about the relevance of the cannibal trope in the afterlives of colonialism is, as I see it, a way for pushing psychoanalytic thought to engage more genuinely, and un-defensively with its colonial past.

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ABSTRACT

Géza Róheim's psychoanalytic, colonial archive is one of the few attempts to document the psychic life of subjects living under settler colonialism. Historians of psychoanalysis have examined Róheim's contributions to the psychoanalytic study of aboriginal childhood, as well as his exploration of aboriginal maternal subjectivity. However, Róheim's account of aboriginal maternal cannibalism needs more attention, as accusations of cannibalism often accompanied cruel colonial policies targeting aboriginal families. In this paper, I contextualise Róheim's psychoanalytic insights on the unconscious motives of cannibalism and infanticide amongst aboriginal mothers and seek to rethink Róheim's psychoanalytic archive from the point of view of hunger, to explore what it can tell us about the complex relationship between psychoanalysis and colonialism, as well as the relationship between psychoanalysis and its colonial past.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, colonialism, Róheim, antiblackness, cannibalism, motherhood, aboriginal, Australia