New York Times 1987). From the Congolese civil war – a massive conflict raging since the late 1990s – anthropophagy has often been reported, notably of armed militias against the forest-dwelling "Pygmy" people (e.g., Baka, Mbuti), whom they despise (Penketh 2004; *UN Report* 2003). These recent cases may be part of acts of autocratic elites deranged by their absolute power, or of war practices not rooted in a history of anthropophagy – at least not as a regular practice. But despite many ambiguities, the ethnographic record from both Africa and other parts of the world (e.g., Melanesia) has contained many examples of cannibalism (see also Lindenbaum 2004). A blanket denial of its existence, as done by some authors in the recent past (like W. Arens in his misleading and erroneous 1979 book), is clearly off the mark. Nevertheless, in the ongoing scholarly debate, the reported cases of cannibalism should be examined not only as actually occurring instances of anthropophagy but also, though not exclusively, as local representations in the specific social and cognitive environment of the groups concerned.[2]

In this article I look at one version of a particular "cannibalist discourse" which is encountered among several groups in southwestern Ethiopia, an area on the borderline of Nilo-Saharan- and Omotic- and Semitic-speaking populations, *not* particularly known as a location where (stories about) cannibalism or witchcraft predominate. For the interpretation of this intriguing phenomenon, reference is made to hypotheses offered by anthropologist P. R. Sanday's general work (1986), emphasizing the psychodynamic aspects of cannibalism. Her core idea is that the rituals and workings of cannibalism should be placed within the framework of psychological mechanisms relating to people's need to deal with the "forces of life and death" (Sanday 1986: xi) and the use of this understanding to control forces seen as necessary for the reproduction of society. This approach does not invalidate other ones, such as discourse analysis of "primitivist" representations, etc. that certain groups make of others. But it looks at the immediate efforts that humans in daily life, and in precarious circumstances, make to enhance survival and cognize their wider environment, including other, only partly known human groups, past and present. While it is clear that in such an approach an analysis of cultural symbolism, as the accumulated outcome of meaning-creating acts of people, are very important, it does not preclude that environmental-economic concerns set the conditions for these representations – reflecting fear of scarcity, loss of survival chances, etc. – to arise. It would thus be preferable to combine a psychodynamic approach à la Sanday with a social-structural analysis that reflects the emerging tensions in a society, which in addition is "oral" in nature, putting great weight on the spoken word and its performance contexts.

Although the search for general features of the cannibalist representations and practices would merit encouragement, it seems that the Ethiopian case discussed here probably only covers the "mortuary cannibalism," one of the categories distinguished by Sanday (1986: 25); not, however, the actually observed practice but only the persistent fear of it, expressed by local people. The similarities between cannibalism and witchcraft – with the latter also dominated by metaphors of "eating others" or the fear thereof, be it here with supernatural means – point to psychological factors related to interpersonal rivalry and jealousy and to the social conditions producing or reinforcing such feelings, is highly relevant. Indeed, the reason why cannibalism and debates about it generate such intense interest may be the universal fear of being annihilated in the act or threat of being eaten – reflecting utter helplessness and negation of one's personality, one's humanity.

The two more specific aims of this article are: a) trying to account for the persistence of the "apparently irrational belief" (cf. Sperber 1982) in cannibals or cannibal-like behaviour among some southern Ethiopian groups *without* there being any demonstrated, actual instances of it; and b) to work towards an explanation of the relation of such a collective representation with social and historical processes, the importance of which has as yet been difficult to unravel. Next to similarities, there are also differences between cannibalist representations and witchcraft discourse, which we still find typically in central and southern Africa, making many victims. While in Ethiopia there is the *zar* spirit possession cult and the occurrence of widespread sorcery-like accusations of *buda* (evil eye, people "eating"

2 Instances of cannibalism as an actual practice are widely known even apart from "survival cannibalism," which seems, however, mainly to occur among stranded Westerners in emergency situations, such as shipwrecks and plane disasters. The scholarly debate on the topic has moved beyond the facile argument of cannibalism as *only* being an image of evil activity projected unto others (which is the untenable thesis of Arens 1979). This argument was refuted by data presented by many authors (e.g., Brown and Tuzin 1983; Knauft 1985; Whitehead 1984; Abler 1992; cf. also Brady 1982). For modern transformations of "cannibalism", see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999.