

# Sin-Eaters, Spiritual Scapegoats, and Volcanic Virgins

By David Lee Burris



I still remember quite vividly a movie we watched as a family during the early 1960's – "Bird of Paradise." We must have watched the colorized 1951 post-code version not the black-and-white 1930's pre-censor code situationally sensitive and suggestive version. My father & mother found the ending quite upsetting.

The setting for both film versions of "Bird of Paradise" was a tropical island paradise where an American sailor - who had fallen in love with the chieftain's daughter – decided to opt for an island stayover while the rest of his shipmates continued on their journey to the scheduled port of destination. His friends had agreed before they left to pick him back up during the two-way itinerary return leg of their trip.

The storyline set-up for the character development crucial to the climatic scenes and the thematic threads coming together toward the movie's Krakatoa type ending - is of an American Sailor who "goes native" because of his strong attraction to the natural beauty and pure innocence of a small isolate island maiden. Blinded by love as he is - he has not put into thoughtful consideration the superstitious and tribalistic ugly side that he starts to see in stark contrast to the natural wonder of the island and the natural innocence of its indigenous people. Unfortunately for our sailor, as his "paradise island" love

interest learns to communicate in English, she reveals that her life has been dedicated to perpetual virginity by her family and her village expects her on a certain - yet still - vaguely described occasion to be a willing martyr to their tribal god. Once our hero has fallen head-over-heels in love with this island vixen – she reveals in broken English that she has been community designated the singular responsibility of appeasing the wrath of Pele the Volcano. When the volcano's lava flow flags Pele's emotional eruption hot with anger – she is to “feed” him by way of her virgin sacrifice. On this occasion, when our primary character has crossed from romantic flirtation to planning for a future with our leading lady - she takes this time to notify him that when Pele erupts and she hears the corresponding tribal drums – it signals preparation for the fulfillment of her life's purpose. When the drums beat - she is expected by everyone she has ever known – to gleefully stroll up to the crater's edge and then to jump into the active volcano. She has been taught from her youth that she needs to do this in order to satiate the volcanic “hunger” and quench the volcanic “anger.”

Although our vacationing sailor “lost his religion” some time ago when he experienced “love at first sight” - he has taught his love of his moral upbringing. Unintentionally over time – he has instructed our now not-so-innocent taboo offending maiden – along with her elementary education in the English language and by way of explaining the origins of words – some deeper insight into the tenets of Western Christianity and in a sort of superstitious syncretism – also the concept of human sin.

Having violated her pledge to perpetual virginity by this part of the story – in the next scene while Pele erupts – sharing aloud her internal monologue - she rationalizes how she has “sinned” against this Geological Gaia God known as the Volcano Pele and the volcano is reacting - demanding the immediate sacrifice of her young life. She is convinced that she must complete that for which she has been dedicated in order to save all those she loves from imminent destruction. Shortly thereafter, and right before the last scene, our leading man rediscovers his religion and he with our leading lady both approach God in their own way offering prayer requests for divine intervention. The movie ends with our sailor rescued by his returned crewmates and our lovely maiden in the process of jumping into the volcano. The movie does not have a “they lived happily ever after” ending!

The screenplay of the movie exhibits an extreme exploitation of literary license & not so plausible loosely based ethnological observations of what’s called “Tiki Culture” along with admitted anecdotally embellished accounts of Christian Missionaries.

**Cultural Islanders Are Not Always Physical Islanders.** Today, throughout Eastern Europe and parts of Scotland there are pockets of an Old World practice called “sin-eating.” [Actually, the contemporary after-funeral custom of inviting mourners by way of hospitality to the family home of the deceased in order to share a common meal – is a New World Practice in origin derived from this Old World Custom of Sin-Eating.]

From *Weird But True History* we read: “Sin Eaters performed a ceremony wherein they took on the sins that the deceased performed — sins that went unforgiven or without confession prior to death. People typically hired a Sin Eater in situations where the deceased died unexpectedly.

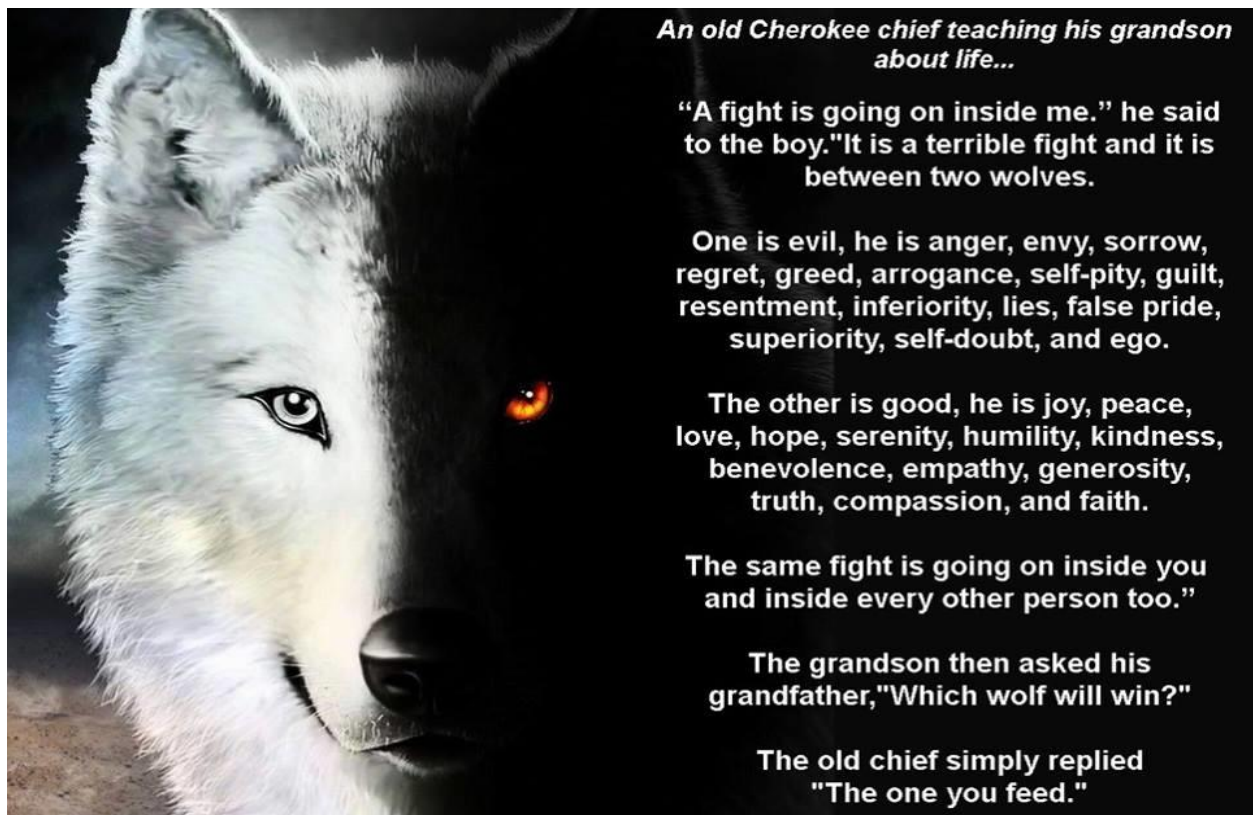
By consuming bread and a drink placed on, or ritually waved over, the dead body, onlookers believed the dead person's sins were digested by the eater after he or she consumed this beggar's feast.

In time, the practice expanded in popularity, so that Sin Eaters also attended to people who had just died of natural causes — because people believed the ritual could help prevent the dead from wandering the countryside after death.”

**First Common Observation.** Both the Satiation of Volcanos by young virgins and the Old World Practice of Sin Eating reveal an innate consciousness and comprehension of human sinfulness paired with a desire to secure recompense. These two strange practices of local custom both reveal a primitive innocence paired with a superstitious ignorance. Especially with the sin-eater we find the added element of a twisted misinterpretation and fundamental misunderstanding of the Old Testament pre-figure ante-type of sin scape-goated by way of “transference” — displacing guilt and placing curse outside the camp. Taken together both the virgin quenching of volcanic wrath and the after-funeral cursed food guilt consumption totally “miss-the-mark” by the false assumption of an imaginary relationship between *Divine Anger* and a “supposed” *Divine Hunger*.

Anthropomorphism was as common an error in the ancient world as it is in the present. The imaginary projection of human characteristics of thought and emotion to the Heavenly Hosts by moderns is as much a mistake as is the primitive attribution of biological cycle and the food intake-elimination process to their demi-gods and gods of nature.

*Bottomline* - The God of the Bible is totally sufficient and “needs” nothing that man can provide. Instead, the God of Genesis is the provider of everything his human creation needs. Although the God of the Bible does not require or expect virgin innocence – His righteous anger does require satiation by way of the altar of sacrifice. Yet, even so, God the Father provided the ultimate and perfect sacrifice in the person of His Only Son – Jesus Christ Our Savior!

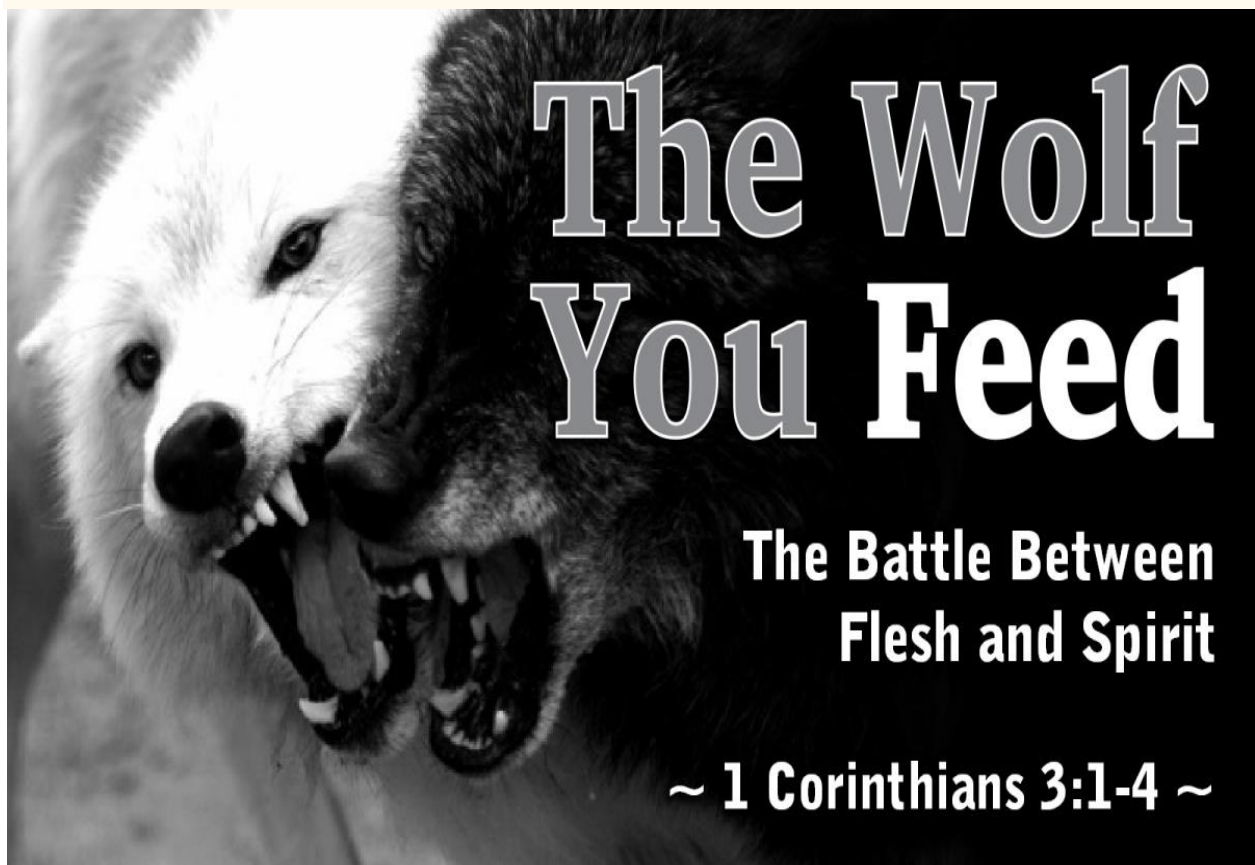


**Second Common Observation.** These two strange but true sinful quench & consumption customs reveal a cross-cultural comprehension of the principle that **“we are what we eat.”**

- **1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3:1-2** “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people, but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not yet able to receive it, and even now you are still not able.”
- **Matthew 15:17-20** “Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”
- **OUR WELL-BALANCED & WELL-PORTIONED MEAL:**  
**Galatians 5:22-23.** “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

C. S. Lewis once observed that our problem is not that our cravings are often too big, but that our cravings are often so small and easily satisfied with lesser things. In other words, our desires tend to favor things like food, drink, and clothing. Or we crave power, pleasure, prestige and possessions. But you see, our cravings are far too small when we focus on these earthly things.

Now to correct things, we often assume that we must get a control on our cravings and just kill them altogether if we are going to be righteous. But you know, the reality of true satisfaction is not in the denial of our cravings, but in redirecting them from small things to the One Great Thing, to God Himself.



# LIFE

# DEATH



Genesis 2:17

from the tree of the  
knowledge of good and  
evil you shall not eat

for in the day  
that you eat from it  
you will surely die

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