

## Representations of Cannibalism in the Congo Free State

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The beginning of the Scramble for Africa in 1885 saw King Leopold II establishing the Congo Free State, in land that would become the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by seizing African lands and possessions for private ownership. This was justified under the guise of a humanitarian mission, to guide savage peoples into the light of civilisation, a celebrated move by the Western world. However, over time, news of devastating abuse began to circulate; enslaved labour, mutilations, destroyed villages, colossal death rates, and many more horrors came to the surface. In imperial Europe, blackness was synonymous with cannibalism, a 'uniform' (Fanon, 2008, p. 86) that was evidence of primitive inferiority. In the Congo Free State, the local peoples were accused of being cannibals as justification for the civilising mission, violence and enslavement. In this chapter, I examine literary representations of cannibalism in the Congo Free State and discuss the loaded language that accompanies cannibal discourse. This involves a review of the etymology of 'cannibal' and cannibalism in European history. I analyse a variety of texts, from Herbert Ward's travel text, *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals* (1891), Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Roger Casement's *Correspondence and Report from His Majesty's Consul at Boma respecting the Administration of the Independent State of the Congo* (1903) (henceforth called 'Congo Report'), to African testimony from victims of the State. I theorise that European representation of the African cannibal relies on malicious, aimless intent in order to be deemed atrocious.

To begin with the taboo subject of cannibalism, it is important to address the loaded language of cannibalism. Under the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) entry, we have the standard definition of a cannibal as 'a person who eats human flesh'. Secondly, we have the definition of a cannibal as 'a member of the Carib people of the West Indies, who were said to eat human flesh'. This suggests that cannibalism in its definition is contained and created by European imperialism and is intrinsically connected to black existence. According to OED, the two terms have been synonymous for almost as long as they have both been recorded, 'cannibal' in 1541 and 'Carib' in 1553 (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). Peter Hulme links this to early Spanish usage of 'canibal', used as ethnic and geographical terminology to describe people from the Island 'Caniba'. Interestingly, Hulme notes that the Spanish 'canibal' disappears during the sixteenth century, 'only reappearing in the nineteenth under English and French influence' (Hulme, 1986, pp. 67-70). Hulme is implying that imperialism reignited the usage of cannibal discourse, furthering the theory that cannibal discourse is rooted in imperialism.

However, this is problematic. Cannibalism is featured throughout white history, without the stigma and label that black history is imprinted with. For example, the process of transubstantiation in Catholicism turns the Eucharist into *the body and blood* of Christ, as clarified by Pope Innocent III in the thirteenth century. In the seventeenth century, surgeon Thomas Brugis recommended this medicine for

sleeping sickness (although, he mentions consuming this concoction even in good health): burn a man's skull until it can be ground into powder, mix it with dried dogs blood and nutmeg, and lastly, serve with white wine (Brugis, 1640, p. 65).

Cannibalism is also enacted in modern society, as sometimes people consume the placenta for nutritional benefits. Why does European history, even language, turn a blind eye to certain histories of cannibalism, yet imprint the stigma of savageness on black history? Kenneth Himmelman links this to healing. He outlines extreme folkloric binaries in European history: witches and saints. Witches used the human body maliciously, whereas saints healed through the use of spiritually pure bodies. In other words, 'self-consumption by the human race has always negotiated the space between positive and negative, between good and evil' (Himmelman, 1997, pp. 192-193, p. 200). To link this theory with the topic of race, I argue that the distinction between black and white cannibalism is the difference in *intention*. This highlights deep-rooted racial binaries; European 'self-consumption' cannot be the same as savage cannibalism, as it has the intention to heal. Whereas, as I discuss throughout this chapter, African cannibalism is depicted as intention-less, therefore, savage and uncivilized.

The credibility of cannibalism has been widely debated by scholars. Anthropologist William Arens specifies two types of cannibalism in *The Man-Eating Myth*, cultural and survival. However, Arens argues that there is little evidence to suggest that cultural cannibalism is customary, and that cannibal discourse relies too heavily on Eurocentric hearsay accounts; 'rumours, suspicions, fears and accusations abound, but no satisfactory first-hand accounts' (Arens, 1979, p. 21). Ward's 1891 *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals* details his time on the Congo River, meeting various local peoples. Ward's account sports a sensationalist title, using colourful and equally as sensational language to depict numerous villages as cannibalistic savages. However, there are many examples of Eurocentric assumptions at play within Ward's account. Firstly, Ward plays on the cannibal stereotype to heighten the threat of danger, assuming that the local population were blood-thirsty cannibals, without any evidence to suggest so. Ward encounters a chief who 'challenged us to fight and warned us that we must sleep tonight with our eyes and ears open...Had they attacked us in numbers, we must assuredly have been beaten, and a cannibal orgy on our remains would have been the inevitable result' (Ward, 1891; 2019, p. 196). This is a prime example of Eurocentric 'suspicions, fears and accusations' (Arens, 1979, p. 21) being utilised to perpetuate the cannibal trope. Ward had no evidence to suggest that a cannibal orgy would be the inevitable result of his intrusion into a village, but the sense of danger and heroism resulting from his survival from the cannibal threat makes the narrative thrilling for the reader.

Furthermore, another scene from Ward's account shows European assumptions in play. In the village of Yalisula, the inhabitants were excited to show Ward various items, 'fish skulls, necklaces of antelopes' teeth, camwood, palm oil...shields, spears, skinny fowls, arrows and knives. Upon asking them to sell some of their necklaces of human teeth, which are quite fashionable in these cannibal countries, they howled and danced, and several men rushes off to procure some' (Ward, 1891; 2019, p. 190). Firstly, Ward may be suggesting that the necklaces of human teeth are purely

for fashion purposes. However, rather than specifying that it may be a harmless cultural fashion, the description of numerous weapons and cannibal countries suggest that the human teeth were procured through cannibalism and worn as trophies. Ward continues, 'a big, burly savage forced his way through the crowd, holding a long, fanged tooth covered with blood...he thought I wanted to buy teeth, and as this tooth had pained him...he had pulled it out and brought it to me to sell!' (Ward, 1891; 2019, p. 190). Here, another explanation is presented as to why human teeth end up on a necklace, contradicting the initial circumstances of cannibalistic trophies. However, it is convenient to assume human teeth on a necklace are evidence of malicious cannibalism. Edward Said states, 'for what the orientalist does is to confirm the Orient in his readers' eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions' (Said, 1978; 2019, p. 65). Although Said is discussing the Orient, it is certainly applicable to the treatment of Africa by European travel writers. Ward reinforces the trope through exaggerated language and assumptions. As Claude Lévi-Strauss theorises, cannibalism can have a variety of intentions, such as 'nutritional needs...a political act...a magical function...ritual...[and] finally, it can be therapeutic' (Lévi-Strauss, 2016, n.p.). Ward's assumption that the necklaces of human teeth are a product of malicious intent carefully omits the possibility that they have been extracted from a naturally-occurring death, or even from toothache as a given example.

Similarly, Eurocentric suspicions and fears come to the forefront of cannibal discourse in the form of filed teeth. Filed teeth present an image of barbaric, primitive savages, ferociously anticipating the tearing of human flesh in a vampiric fashion. Conrad perpetuates the dangers of a man with filed teeth in *Heart of Darkness*. We first encounter cannibals in the novella with Marlow's African crew, taken on near Stanley Pool. From the description of the fireman, who 'had filed teeth...the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks' (Conrad, 1899; 2008, p. 140), it may be possible that Marlow's crew belong to the Bateke tribe. According to Ward, the Bateke 'score their cheeks and temples with long, thin incisions' similar to Marlow's fireman. On the other hand, Ward clarifies that 'the Bateke around Stanley Pool are not known to practice cannibalism' (Ward, 1891; 2019, p. 94) which contradicts the implication of the fireman's filed teeth. Although Marlow's crew may belong to a different tribe, the descriptions match those of Ward's. The cannibal trope is imposed upon these characters to exaggerate their savageness. This point is furthered by the fact that the cannibal crew are the only African characters to be given speech, even if it is in an animalistic manner, 'Catch 'im,' he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth – 'catch 'im. Give 'im to us...Eat 'im!' (Conrad, 1899; 2008, p. 144). Their speech serves the purpose to highlight their cannibalism in case it was not clear enough. Conrad's appropriation of the cannibal trope, according to Patrick Brantlinger, is 'drawn from the repertoire of Victorian imperialism and racism that painted an entire continent dark' (Brantlinger, 1988, p. 262).

Although Conrad is using the cannibal trope to emphasise the savageness of the Congo, he is utilising racial binaries to subvert them. Marlow's cannibal crew are

praised for their ability to restrain themselves: 'fine fellows – cannibals...they were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them...after all, they did not eat each other before my face.' When compared to the pilgrims joining Marlow and his crew, who are depicted with gluttony, 'the white men rushing out of a tumble-down hovel, with great gestures of joy and surprise and welcome, seemed very strange – had the appearance of being held there captive by a spell. The word 'ivory' would ring in the air' (Conrad, 1899; 2008, p. 138). The cannibals abstaining from practising cannibalism in front of Marlow, displaying self-control, in contrast to the greedy white pilgrims accentuates the moral bankruptcy and self-interest of the ivory trade. Furthermore, as the cannibals flash their teeth in wait for human flesh, Marlow excuses them: 'I would no doubt have been properly horrified, had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry...they had been engaged for six months.' It appears that intention is key to this moment. However, Conrad subverts the racial binaries that would typically depict cannibals as blood-thirsty vampiric savages. Although not fully justifiable, as this still depicts cannibalism and murder simultaneously, the acknowledgement that their hunger would be a driving force suggests that it may be an act of survival. Yet, they are *still* able to restrain themselves, even though Marlow admits 'no fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, *disgust simply does not exist where hunger is*' [emphasis my own] (Conrad, 1899; 2008, p. 144, p. 146).

The cannibal's restraint ensures that Kurtz's descent into chaos is the embodiment of 'the horror!' (Conrad, 1889; 2008, p. 178). Often overlooked by scholars, Marlow alludes to Kurtz participating in cannibalism, although abstractly mentioned. 'I saw him open his mouth wide – it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him' (Conrad, 1899; 2008, p. 166). Not only does this quote encapsulate Kurtz's lust for greed, it also alludes to Kurtz's desire for greed overcoming him, leading him to 'inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation' (Conrad, 1899; 2008, p. 153). Again, it appears that intention is the most judged aspect of cannibalism for Conrad. African cannibalism can be accepted as a result of African ignorance of civilized standards. As Arens states, 'this interpretation resorts to both a single and a double standard. The single constant is African ignorance. The double standard involves the...dismissal of the existing reports on cannibalism for Europeans and the acceptance of every report for non-European people' (Arens, 1979, pp. 20-21). Conrad is utilizing pre-existing notions of African cannibalism to reverse the horror. The cannibal crew could restrain themselves even in severe hunger, yet Kurtz ate in self-grandiose chaos, he 'lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts' (Conrad, 1899; 2008, p. 164). Conrad is refusing to dismiss the possibility of European cannibalism, albeit whilst using 'Africa as a setting and backdrop' (Achebe, 1979; 2016, p. 21). Utilising the cannibal trope, he enhances the depravity of Kurtz's descent into cannibal savagery.

Casement's 1903 *Congo Report* reports minimal encounters with cannibals, and it is questionable whether Casement saw cannibalism first-hand. For example, Casement claims that cannibalism was connected with the slave trade and had seen himself human beings being conveyed for sale, as was particularly prevalent on the Lulonga

River. They provided 'human meat for those stronger than themselves' (Casement, 1903; 2003, p. 89). Although we cannot rule out the sale of human beings in some form of cannibal trade, it seems likely that the humans were being sold into slavery rather than for consumption. Their labour is more valuable than a meal. Arens relays an example of how this situation may be in reality: 'one traveler [*sic*] was told by the Arabs that many of the Congolese groups whom they formerly took as slaves deserved this fate, since they were cannibals'. Arens' story suggests that the stigma of cannibals was utilised to justify enslavement and create a monopoly. Arens explains how Arab slavers spread rumours of cannibalism on both sides, in order to reduce European presence and the enslaved from seeking help from Europeans (Arens, 1979, p. 84, p. 87) In that case, it is likely that Casement was told that the people of the Lulongo River were cannibals for two reasons: firstly, to justify their enslavement, and secondly, to reduce the possibility that slaves would flee or revolt.

Casement continues by relaying a past encounter. He recalls a woman 'was killed in the village I was passing through', and later, 'her head and other portions of her brought and offered for sale to some of the crew' (Casement, 1903; 2003, p. 89). Firstly, the village is unnamed, evidently this affair did not occur in the Lulongo river, and therefore is not evidence of a cannibal trade there. Secondly, it is unclear whether Casement saw this woman being killed first-hand; therefore, the questions of how the woman was killed and whether her body was for sale for cannibal use arise. If the woman was killed due to disease, or an unjust act of warfare, the intentions of cannibalism are changed as it excludes the act of murder too. If Casement had simply asked if that was the case, it is possible that a misunderstanding took place. Again, I draw upon another story from Arens. Arens relays a tale heard from 'more trusting informants', in which an unconscious African victim would be held upside down to extract blood, to be made into pills, and thus consumed by the European to stay alive in Africa. He 'failed to appreciate the political symbolism of the narrative, which cast colonial Europeans as the consumers of African vitality' (Arens, 1979, pp. 12-13). The Victorian catalogue of racism depicts Africans as inferior to Europeans intellectually and physically; therefore, it is plausible that Europeans would take African words literally. Allegories, humour, symbolism would be lost. Running with the theory that Casement asked for the purpose of the body parts, and the response was for consumption, Casement could be missing an allegory, humour, symbolism, similar to Arens.

Cannibalism is first mentioned concerning the Ntomba and Batwas peoples. Casement notes that both tribes are still cannibals, through the practice is 'repressed and not so openly indulged in as formerly'. Casement is emphasising the reduction of cannibalism throughout the Congo, supported by his praise of the State in its efforts to suppress the act. Cannibal discourse within the *Congo Report* is minimal, only being featured three times throughout the entire report, excluding African testimony in 'Inclosure Three'. When it is discussed, it is concerning the level of cannibalism still being practised in that area, shown in Ntomba, Batwas, Iberi, 'whose people are said to be still open cannibals', and finally the Lulongo River (Casement, 1903; 2003, p. 66, p. 89, p. 83). Firstly, I want to address the lack of evidence that these areas were rife with cannibalism, or that Casement has witnessed this first-hand. There is not

much context to these allegations, which are nevertheless depicted as open-shut cases. Particularly with allegations towards the village of Iberi, where Casement had only heard rumours of their cannibalism, they might be due to Eurocentric assumptions.

On the contrary, I theorise that Casement's mention of cannibalism serves the purpose to highlight the unsuccessful civilizing mission and maltreatment of the Congo Free State. On every mention, there is systemic abuse. For example, in the case of the Ntomba and Batwas peoples, they are '*still* cannibals'. The Iberi village, said to be *still* open cannibals, was mentioned due to maltreatment of the inhabitants of nearby Walla by State soldiers and State fines, 'many of them [had] been compelled to sell their children', the example given of young Ikewe being sold to Iberi. Lastly, the case of the Lulonga River. Although Casement does note that events like the woman's body being sold are not as common in 1903, 'it is...to be regretted that in its efforts to suppress such barbarous practices the Congo Government [relied on]...very savage agencies...the measures employed to obtain recruits for the public service were themselves often but little removed from the malpractices that service was designed to suppress' (Casement, 1903; 2003, p. 66, p. 82, p. 89). There are numerous angles: firstly, cannibalism still being practised is a failure in the civilizing mission. Secondly, children being sold to accused cannibal villages highlights the barbarity of the State in imposing impossible fines and abuse. Lastly, any reduction in cannibalism is a result of barbaric measures and abuse from the Force Publique, therefore, further damning evidence of State abuse. This works in favour of Casement, a key figure in the Congo Reform Association.

'Inclosure Three' to the *Congo Report* features the statements of five girls from Lake Mantumba, named Bikela, Sekolo, Elima, Bonsondo and Ncongo, collected to record conditions following the Rubber Wars which began in 1893. The five girls had survived atrocious encounters with the State, recalling how their homes and families were destroyed. Elima's statement is the only one to mention cannibalism, in the form of cannibal soldiers. After hearing gunshots, Elima fled her home with her little sister, hiding in a bush for six days before being captured by State soldiers. She then witnessed the soldiers murder her sister. The soldiers captured Elima and forced her to search for food and other towns, however Elima was afraid and so the soldiers began to beat her until the Corporal said that they must not kill her, but instead take her to the white man. The white man and soldiers had captured three people, one being an old woman: 'the cannibal soldiers asked Bonginda [the white man's name, Lieutenant Durieux] to give them the old woman to eat, and Bonginda told them to take her. Those soldiers took the woman and cut her throat, and then divided her and ate her. Elima saw all this done.' Later, Elima was sent in search for food. The cannibal soldiers told Bonginda that Elima was escaping, expressing intent to kill her, Bonginda settled on tying Elima to a tree. (Elima in Casement, 1903; 2003, pp. 152-154).

A reminder of the contrived circumstances in which Africans' words reach us from this context, Elima's statement is useful to Casement to highlight the above-mentioned savage agencies and State abuse. Elima provides evidence of State-

sanctioned cannibalism. The in-depth detail of how the cannibal soldiers consumed the old woman's body, when compared to the minimal descriptions of cannibalism within the *Congo Report* main body, serve the purpose of documenting the malicious intentions of the cannibal *soldiers* – they are committing an atrocious act of cannibalism *against the local peoples* with malice, with permission by a white State agent. Casement deters from going into detail of cannibal acts throughout the main body of the report to avoid the charge of sensationalism, as would be the charge against Ward's *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals*. However, through Elima's statement the European accusation of innate African cannibalism does not hold up. Robert Burroughs theorises that these statements 'opened up a narrative perspective beyond the imaginative powers of European contemporaries. There is a thickness of description which exceeds the material, moral and racial concerns that dominate European reportage' (Burroughs, 2019, p. 65). I agree with Burroughs as statements like Elima's open up space for individual African voices, which had not previously been accommodated for. The terrible details certainly evoke empathy and the statements show the humanity of Africans, who are often represented as animalistic primates in European texts like *Heart of Darkness*. In texts such as Ward's and Conrad's, the cannibal trope is at the forefront of their stories. In comparison to Elima's statement it is easy to see the exaggeration European writers place on cannibalism.

In the Congolese testimonies I have consulted, there is little mention of cannibalism. The only mention is in testimony from Bomolo, chief of Bolumboloko, Baringa, which states plainly: 'we neither kill nor eat sentinels [agents] in my village' (Bomolo, 12/12/04 in Papiers Janssens. D., p. 15). Throughout this chapter, most of the cannibal discourse is from European perspectives. Although I am not dismissing the existence of cannibalism in Africa, I argue that the cannibal trope is utilized for numerous purposes, rather than given as evidence. For Ward, cannibalism is a sensationalist buzzword that he can profit from, due to the firm Victorian belief in the African cannibal. For Conrad, cannibalism is useful to exaggerate the barbarity of the Congo Free State and to poke holes in the concept of Western civilization. For Casement, cannibalism highlights the faults in the management of the Congo, weaponizing evidence against the State in calls for reform. Yet, in Congolese testimony, it is not a hot topic. Notwithstanding the highly mediated character of the latter texts, this implies that European use of cannibalism highly exaggerates it for different purposes. A refusal to look at cannibalism from different perspectives, different intentions, but keenly looked at for evidence of savagery. However, as Hulme states, 'what is at issue is not just an idea (of eating human flesh) but rather a particular manner of eating human flesh – ferociously – that is denoted in the European languages by the specific term 'cannibalism' (Hulme, 1986, p. 83). European literary representations of cannibalism are true to the stigma of ferocious man-eaters, as seen in Ward and Conrad's work. In Casement's work, we see a manipulation of the cannibal to serve as evidence that intervention and reform in the Congo Free State is required. However, there is no evidence to suggest that cannibalism is witnessed first-hand aside from Ward's *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals* and Elima's statement. Ward's work demands that we rely on the European account, which is difficult to do as a modern reader due to the

exaggerated use of the cannibal trope and our understanding of racial ideologies at the time. Ultimately, the use of the African cannibal trope dominates Eurocentric literature from the nineteenth century. A clear manifestation of the racial power imbalances of the time, with an eagerness to dismiss European histories or the possibility of white cannibalism. My conclusion is in agreeance with Alan Rice's: 'the cannibalistic nature of the other is almost always a myth, which despite bearing little relation to historical reality contains and transmits significant cultural messages for those who maintain it' (Rice, 1998, p. 110). Representations of cannibalism in European literature are mostly mythological methods of control and domination, with connotations of chaos and savagery.



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