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Sophie Dulucq

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**‘SAVAGES ARE BUT SHADES OF OURSELVES’  
CENTRAL AFRICAN CANNIBALS IN HERBERT WARD’S NARRATIVES (1890-1910)**

**Sophie Dulucq**

**Abstract**

Herbert Ward’s books, respectively published in 1890 and 1910, both account for the five years this explorer, administrator, soldier, and artist spent in the Congo valley in the 1880s. Ward – a little-known figure in the history of colonial conquest – offered a first-hand account of the early years of the Free State of Congo and of his encounters with “cannibals”. One of the goals of this chapter is to analyse Ward’s narratives in the light of the historical context in central Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. This study also seeks to examine the second wave of “cannibal descriptions” which emerged with the development of imperial histories about Africa. In this context, Ward’s publications fit into a literary sub-genre intended for audiences eager for thrills and frightening cannibal stories. Ward, however, had rather original views on cannibalism, if not fully sympathetic, he was at least empathetic towards the so-called “cannibals” of Central Africa, and always kept in mind their humanity.

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‘Savages are but shades of ourselves’. This intriguing quote from Ovid was chosen by Herbert Ward as an epigraph for his 1910 book, in which he recounted the adventurous years he had spent in the Congo valley in the 1880s, and his encounters with several “cannibals”. This publication, entitled *A Voice from the Congo*, echoed a previous book, released twenty years earlier and attractively entitled *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals*. Covering the ‘five most impressionable years of [his] life’, both books offer first-hand accounts during the early years of the Congo Free State, an extensive colonial territory newly founded by Leopold II, king of the Belgians.<sup>1</sup> Ward’s narratives, written at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are in many ways difficult to grasp because of their complexity and depth: they inextricably mix the usual stereotypes and topoi about Africa with accurate notations, truly relevant to historians. While his testimony fits into a rather classic discourse pattern on cannibalism in Central Africa, it also conveys original and sometimes confusing touches, including forms of empathy towards the Africans and the so-called “cannibals”. Ward himself was certainly an uncommon man who had

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several lives, being successively a sailor, an explorer, an administrator, a soldier, but also a painter and a sculptor. It is therefore simultaneously as a colonialist, an adventurer, and an artist that he observes the different individuals he meets, describes and often draws in his sketchbooks.

The limitations of this type of nineteenth century narratives are quite obvious and have been pointed out by several historians, anthropologists, and specialists in adventure and travel literature.<sup>2</sup> A majority of Western writers have thus felt ‘the urge to situate cannibalism into geographies of difference’.<sup>3</sup> Central Africa has for centuries been one of these “geographies” in European discourse, from exploration literature to children’s novels.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the Zande kingdoms of northern Congo have systematically been depicted as areas plagued by cannibalism, from the accounts of explorations in the 1860s to early twentieth century travel guides.<sup>5</sup> Around 1890-1900, the story of adventures featuring cannibals in the remotest parts of the world almost became a sub-genre in itself, intended for an audience eager for thrills.

The ambition of this chapter is manifold. Firstly, it aims to shed light on the singular character that was Herbert Ward, sometimes mentioned by historians, but ultimately little known. We will then examine his double testimony taking into consideration the specific context of the Congo region at the end of the nineteenth century, shaped by several decades of violence and large-scale socio-political upheavals. It is in the light of these historical insights that the characteristics of Ward’s – more personal and sometimes truly unusual – testimony on cannibals should be analysed, both in line with the dominant discursive models of his time. Finally, it should be made clear that the point here is not to examine the “reality” of cannibalism in the societies Ward encountered – the authenticity of such practices has already triggered passionate debate among anthropologists and historians – but to consider the issue with an open mind, without starting from the widely held assumption that cannibalism is a matter of discursive constructions by Westerners in search of sensationalism. As Vicky Van Bockhaven has pointed out, one must be aware of some side-effects of postcolonial criticisms: ‘Instances of violence on the part of the colonised are over-generalised as examples of negative colonial representations. An example of this is the denial of the occurrence of cannibalism. Such phenomena have sometimes become a blind spot in postcolonial studies’.<sup>6</sup> I will therefore choose here to take a neutral position, refusing to consider cannibal narratives as purely fantastical or, on the contrary, as ethnographically relevant. I believe that this seems to be the only possible position for an historian of cultural representations.

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### **Herbert Ward (1863-1919), a man of many faces**

Herbert Ward is a very versatile character: a man of action, a man of letters, and a gifted artist. He was born in London in 1863 into a middle-class family. His father Edwin and his grand-father Henry were renowned naturalists.<sup>7</sup> A mediocre student at Milton Hill School, he became a sailor at the age of fifteen and spent several years in New Zealand, Australia and Northern Borneo in the early 1880s.<sup>8</sup> In contact with the Maori and the frontier as a settler, he learned to fish and hunt, to navigate canoes and to ride horses.<sup>9</sup> After his return to England, he was hired in 1884 by General Strauch for the *Association internationale du Congo* (AIC), which became the *État Indépendant du Congo* (Congo Free State) the following year.<sup>10</sup> It was on this occasion that he met the famous explorer Henry Morton Stanley for the first time. Ward was interviewed for a position as an officer in the colonial territory that Stanley was then organising on behalf of Leopold II, and for which administration he was recruiting men from all over Europe.

Ward first set foot in Africa in October 1884. He joined the Sanford Exploring Expedition.<sup>11</sup> For a few months, he ensured the logistics of the manual transport service on the Lower Congo before becoming the administrator of ‘Bangala station’ (nowadays Makanza) on the upper Congo for six months, from late 1885 to early 1886. He then returned to his previous post on the lower river for several months.<sup>12</sup> In 1887, he was recruited and participated in the ‘Emin Pasha Relief Expedition’ led by Stanley, a mission aiming to assist the Ottoman governor appointed by General Gordon on the Upper Nile, then besieged by Mahdist forces in Sudan. The expedition went back up the Congo River and travelled through the Ituri forest and the Great Lakes region – an extraordinarily difficult route. The endeavour resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the troops during a terrible three-year journey. Ward’s first book, *My Life with Stanley’s Rear Guard*, accounts for the hardships of this infamous episode. However, like other Congo Free State officers, bound by the obligation of confidentiality which prevented them from publishing anything without the agreement of Congo’s central administration, Herbert Ward had to let Henry Morton Stanley give the first account of the tragic adventure which unfolded in 1890. That is why he did not publish his notebook until 1891, tarnishing Stanley’s image in the process.<sup>13</sup> As a member of the tragic rescue mission, Ward was later invited to the United States, where he gave lectures in several cities.<sup>14</sup>

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Ward left Africa in 1889, never to return. During the five years he had spent there (1884-1889), he had acquired a good knowledge of three African languages: Kikongo, Bobangi, and Kiswahili. He had also taken numerous photographs and drawn hundreds of sketches of African men and women, landscapes, animals, some of which were reproduced in his publications. He had also gathered thousands of objects. The collection he brought back from the Congo became an essential element in his later life in England and France, and its history is well documented because it was donated to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.<sup>15</sup> Nearly 2,714 items were transmitted to the Smithsonian, 64% of which were African weapons of all kinds. In addition, 800 collected artefacts were objects of everyday life, including carved wooden statuettes, costumes, jewellery, baskets, musical instruments, and pottery. The Congolese regions covered were relatively diverse, as objects from the Mongala and Kasai regions from the collection show, these pertain to the Mangbetu, Luba and Imbangala populations. Not all of them were taken during military operations since Ward was not able to visit all of the areas concerned; he most likely bought or traded some. He was a passionate collector, gathering objects not only in the name of their scientific interest or for their martial meaning, but also as cherished souvenirs. Upon his return from Africa, he showed a real attachment to his collection: not only did he draw inspiration from the artefacts for his artistic creations, but he also preserved them with meticulous care and often displayed them in public exhibitions.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of his involvement with the Congo Free State, Ward lived for a time in London before settling in France, pursuing an artistic career in Paris where he found a sculpture studio rue d’Amsterdam before moving to a small house on boulevard Berthier in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in 1906.<sup>17</sup> He became a successful sculptor and left important representations of African “types”. Several of his sculptures are currently kept at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, as well as in French and American museums.

To use an expression coined by Lancelot Arzel, Herbert Ward can be branded a ‘conquistador’ of Central Africa.<sup>18</sup> He certainly shared many characteristics with his European counterparts involved in the conquest of the region in the 1880s. But he was also different, in a sense, because of his artistic sensibility and insatiable curiosity for the African populations he met during his peregrinations. In this respect, his vision of the Congo “cannibals” was paradoxical: Ward was vastly impregnated by the prejudices of his time but nevertheless, many paragraphs from his books offer original views on cannibalism that cannot be found in the vast majority of other writers’ narratives.

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## The omnipresence of the cannibal figure

Both of Ward’s books are a combination of travel narratives, and of adventure and exploration stories<sup>19</sup>. As is to be anticipated for this kind of literature set in Central Africa, the figure of the cannibal is extremely recurrent. In *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals* (1890), the words “cannibal(s)” and “cannibalism” are used 47 times over 308 pages, more than once every 6-7 pages. And let us not forget that the book title itself is repeated in every left page head section. Thus, the word “cannibal” is displayed more than 150 times under the reader’s eyes, and 47 times in the body of the text itself, with a grand total of 200 occurrences in a 300-pages book. In *A Voice from the Congo* (1910), the same words are used 31 times over 321 pages, almost once every 10 pages, and a whole chapter entitled “Cannibalism” is devoted to anthropophagy. Ward thus met the expectations of large thrill-seeking audiences fond of horrible descriptions, at a time when publishers were pushing for sensational titles and anecdotes. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, one can observe a striking multiplication of book titles explicitly referring to cannibalism. This is a persistent feature for travel stories, descriptions of faraway territories or missionary narratives – sometimes rather misleading since the readers might be disappointed in the end, when they discover that the cannibal anecdotes that were promised in the title are finally very few. Numerous examples can be given of this publishing trend, typical of the 1880s-1890s, such as Carl Lummholtz’s *Among Cannibals. An Account of Four Years’ Travels in Australia, and of Camp Life with the Aborigines of Queensland* (1889) or Carl Bock’s *The Head Hunters of Borneo* (1881) – translated *Chez les cannibales de Borneo* in the 1887 French version —, Theodor Westmark’s book *Trois ans au Congo. Séjour chez les Bangallas, cannibales du Haut-fleuve* (1886), and Louis Noir’s *Au pays des cannibales. La mission Dybowski. Châtiments des assassins de Crampel* (1894).

When mentioning anthropophagy, Ward quite often refers to the ‘Bangalas’ (Imbangala) present in his constituency, to the Arruimi, once to the Batekes, and to the Azande in general, the infamous Nyam-Nyam or Niam Niam depicted as cannibals by various European travellers since the eighteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Of course, Ward disembarked in Central Africa with previous travellers’ narratives in mind, and full of many thrilling expectations he was eager to fulfil. He never questioned the reality of cannibalism, but authoritatively presented it as a fact, in many assertions scattered throughout his books: ‘Cannibalism is a regular practice. Human flesh is an article of diet’; ‘Cannibalism is as common in the Oupoto villages as it ever was at Bangala; slaves and prisoners of war being frequently sacrificed to appease this unnatural appetite’.<sup>21</sup>

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Ward’s texts are packed with colourful, usually second-hand anecdotes about cannibalism in Upper Congo, and of statements asserted with the authority of first-hand accounts. He often seasoned his observations with a pinch of humour and derision, a common mechanism when one addresses gruesome facts, as Laurence Goldman suggests: ‘Clearly, commentators are dancing, albeit dangerously, on the borders between fact and fiction, between the sensational and the serious, between profundity and jocularly’.<sup>22</sup> Here is an example among many others from Ward’s works:

From my position as commander of the fortified station [Bangala-Station], as well as my desire to be on the friendliest terms with the natives, I was able to see a good deal of their modes of life, and the “interior economy” of the arrangements among the Bangalas. Almost weekly some savage act of cannibalism would be brought to my notice, and although the villagers in the vicinity of the station did, after a time, chary of acknowledging to a white man their liking for human flesh, or their participation in these orgies, I knew that I should never have far to seek to find my friends of to-day, [...] indulging in a light repast off the limbs of some unfortunate slave [...] or banqueting upon the bodies of the enemies slaughtered in some recent conflict.<sup>23</sup>

Various scholars have already underlined that it was hardly necessary for European travellers and explorers to prove anything tangible about cannibalism.<sup>24</sup> Evans-Pritchard himself wrote about the Azande – the group to which the Imbangalas mentioned by Ward are related – that, even in the absence of direct evidence, ‘there is no smoke without fire’ when it comes to cannibalism.<sup>25</sup> If the famous anthropologist could write such an assertion without blinking in the 1960s, we can presume that an adventurer could claim it with no hesitation whatsoever in 1890 or 1910. Finding skulls used as ornaments, teeth necklaces, or just bones exposed in the open is sufficient to evoke human sacrifices, which are generally mistaken for cannibalistic practices.<sup>26</sup> That is something Herbert Ward does constantly: he describes specific cultural practices and systematically reinterprets them in terms of cannibalism. For instance, he holds the custom of filing teeth to ‘points’, which was very common among Central African inhabitants, as an indisputable evidence of anthropophagy, asserting that ‘[a]mong the cannibal tribes the front incisor teeth are chipped to points by means of an iron chisel’.<sup>27</sup> Nicolas Cambon has suggested that the sheer evocation of the night, of distant noises in the forest, of distant drumbeats or of the smell of grilled meat were often enough to ‘prove’ cannibalism, or at least to make it ‘very probable’ to European eyes.<sup>28</sup> Ward repeatedly resorts to these discursive methods in order to set

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the mood for his readers, playing on their emotion and expectations and creating a nebulous, but powerful, anthropophagical atmosphere. On many occurrences, he relies only on the testimonies of groups who proclaim that their neighbours are cannibals; this is for instance what the [Bakongos](#), living on the lower river, say about the population of the upper Congo valley. In Ward’s narratives as well as in other narratives since the sixteenth century, enemies are almost always the cannibals.

In order to fully understand the background in which these recurrent mentions of cannibalism were uttered, a word must be said about the historical context of nineteenth century Central Africa. The upper valley and north-eastern parts of the Congo were, at the time, scarred by major historical phenomenon such as the considerable expansion of Arabo-Swahili slave trade networks and the unprecedented increase of internal slavery, after the decline of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>29</sup> These two facts lead to the astounding statistic of one in three people with a slave status in some regions.<sup>30</sup> Herbert Ward eye-witnessed such traffic – on one occasion, he even met Tippu Tip, the prominent Zanzibari slave-trader – and he provided a reliable testimony on the constant state of war and development of slave raids affecting Congolese people.

The European intrusion in the region was also exceptionally violent, as evidenced by Stanley’s conquest methods, his alliances with the most prominent Zanzibari slave-traders, and the atrocities perpetrated by some officers and their troops. In fact, ‘the practice of human trophies was then a reality of the conquest wars waged by the Independent State of Congo (ÉIC) troops from the 1880s to the 1900s’.<sup>31</sup> As Arzel demonstrated in a journal special issue devoted to colonial human trophies,

[these] should not be reduced to just some “severed hands”. [...] It is therefore necessary to get as close as possible to the conquerors —European “conquistadores”, African soldiers, local mercenaries— to understand how these human trophies were a routine practice among the *Force Publique* troops from the 1880s to the 1900s. It was in the interaction with indigenous people that these human trophies took on a strong political significance. Designated as “blood trophies”, [...] they were indeed coupled with beheadings and emasculations as if they were ransacked bodies, before being put on display to signify the victory of one over the other. It is not only a question of “human remains”, since the term “trophy” insists precisely on the political and fighting dimension of these dismemberments.<sup>32</sup>

In such a social, political and economic context, the life of a slave was not worth much and, on the other hand, war and endemic violence participated in the emergence of ‘conflict



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clusters’ conducive to unrestrained ferocity.<sup>33</sup> It is not unlikely that, in such context, the number of massacres or even of human sacrifices, may have increased dramatically.

Historical sources, however, are not as robust as far as cannibalism is concerned. In order to explain the omnipresence of cannibal stories in Ward’s accounts, as well as in other authors’ narratives, it is tempting to resort to the concept of ‘cultural zone’ proposed by Mary-Louise Pratt in her work on European travels to Africa.<sup>34</sup> In view of the socio-political destabilisation described above, it may be possible that some co-construction of cannibal narratives by Europeans and Africans, both equally fascinated and frightened by the practice, occurred and that discourses on cannibalism from both groups could reinforce each other. Peter Hulme very convincingly explores this idea in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*.<sup>35</sup> This concept is also compellingly discussed in a recent study about contemporary Uganda.<sup>36</sup> In this perspective, it is thinkable that cannibalism emerged and became a common trope, passionately discussed by Europeans and natives, in other words an ‘entangled object’ whose reality was no longer questioned.<sup>37</sup>

It is therefore worth noting that Ward almost never claims to be a direct witness to the “cannibal orgies” he mentions so frequently. This is the case when he tells the story of a slave boy eaten at Bangala Station the previous year: though it is a rumour, the episode is depicted with vivid colours.<sup>38</sup> In fact, in just one occasion does he claim to have seen directly a cannibal act and only in rare other cases does he mention that four different persons directly told him that they had eaten human flesh or witnessed such practices. Ward shares these anecdotes with an accent of truth and with the authority of a European mastering local languages: “Do you people eat human bodies?” said I one day, upon entering a native village, and pointed to a quantity of meat, spitted upon long skewers, being smoke-dried over numerous smouldering fires. “*Io; yo tē?*” (“Yes; don’t you?”) was the instant reply.<sup>39</sup> In another incident, he wrote: ‘[A] native chief stated to me that the time occupied in devouring a human body varied according to whether the latter happened to be one of his enemies, when he would eat the body himself, or merely a slave, who would be divided between his followers’.<sup>40</sup>

In 1886, with his servant’s complicity, he hid in the dark and watched a nocturnal ‘cannibal feast’ from a great distance:

I saw a group of perhaps forty or fifty men gathered in a circle around a large fire.

Occasionally I detected the glitter of a spearhead and heard the metal jingle of bracelets and anklets amid the uproar of human voices. They all appeared to be talking at the same time.

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As the fire sometimes burst up into flame, it cast flickering lights upon their bodies and cicatrised faces. This was the first time I was the actual witness of human flesh-eating. The process was being carried on before me in all its grim and awful reality.<sup>41</sup>

One can only be very cautious, even sceptical, when confronted to this alleged eyewitness testimony, all the more so as Ward himself explained that he spoke the Bangala language very badly at the time. It should be added that this scene is barely mentioned in the 1890 narrative, but is described at length in the 1910 story, which incidentally devoted an entire chapter to the question of anthropophagy.

Elsewhere, Ward repeatedly recounts in different anecdotes – without providing decisive proof – that he was offered meat that was actual human flesh, for instance ‘some pieces of uncooked flesh, spitted upon a stick, the nature of which we could only darkly conjecture’.<sup>42</sup> Visiting an Oupoto settlement on the Upper Congo, Ward and his companion are greeted by a man offering pieces of meat that immediately appear suspicious to them: ‘We could not even find words to thank our would-be host; we declined both dog and human flesh (for such we discovered the other meat to be) with all emphasis that must have astonished our friend, and departed from his village horrified at the nature of the repast offered us’.<sup>43</sup>

A bit further, Ward recalls an anecdote about an Arruimi village, designated by a Zanzibari informant as a cannibal settlement,

On arriving there, almost the first man I saw was carrying four large lumps of human flesh, with the skin still clinging to it, on a stick; and, through Fida<sup>44</sup>, I found that they had killed a man this morning, and had divided the flesh. Subsequently I came across a party of men squatting round a fire, before which this ghastly flesh, exposed on spits, was cooking. Majuta, scared and horrified, rushed back into the bush, and I quickly quitted the village, satisfied with the truth of the stories the Arabs had related, and not desirous of witnessing any further confirmation of them.<sup>45</sup>

These dubious, approximate episodes refer to an often-debated question: the poor quality of direct testimonies about anthropophagy acts, polluted by a whole set of prejudices, translation issues, pre-established reading grids and vivid emotions. Obeyesekere suggests that some so-called eyewitnesses fabricated their accounts many years later to meet the growing European demand for stories of savage cannibalism —somewhat in the manner of Ward’s mentor, Stanley, or of Ward himself, who was much more talkative in his 1910 narrative than twenty years earlier.<sup>46</sup>

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### **Cannibals, ‘the most enlightened and enterprising of the Congo communities’**

What is striking in Ward’s prose, compared to moralising explorers or travellers imbued with their white man’s superiority, is a form of fairly rare open-mindedness. Not that he was devoid of paternalism and spared by the ideology of the “civilising mission”, but it seems clear that he was first and foremost eager for human encounters and that he felt comfortable in Africa:

I took to Africans from the first. I was young, full of life and high spirits, and I regarded everyone I met as a friend. My confidence was sometimes checked, but never shaken. With youthful exuberance of spirits, I fraternised with everyone I met, and soon found that there was a fund of good human in the African composition. There is a good side to even the most villainous-looking savage, and I generally found it [...].<sup>47</sup>

Even more striking is Ward’s care to minimise the so-called savagery of those he considered to be proven cannibals, or at least to counterbalance that savagery with positive comments. On several occasions, he expresses almost naive astonishment in front of the gentleness he finds in the presumed cannibals he meets, and especially in the kindness they demonstrate towards their relatives or towards him,

I find it strange to myself when I think over the many conflicting emotions I have often observed betraying themselves in the lives of these savages; swayed one moment by a thirst for blood and indulging in the most horrible orgies, they may yet the next be found approaching their homes looking forward with the liveliest interest to the caresses of their wives and children, or, with patient gaze regarding the strange surroundings of the white man, in his mud-built house, and listening politely to his uncouth and ridiculous attempts at expressing himself in their language, assisting him with a word when he hesitates, and supplying the many gaps in the sense of his utterances by a timely smile of encouragement or a hopeless effort to render his meaning clear to the other listening ears.<sup>48</sup>

In 1890, he had made similar remarks and compared favourably the presumed cannibals’ behaviour with that of the Bakongo people, in contact with Europeans since the sixteenth century:

It must not be supposed, however, that the cannibal tribes of the interior are altogether brutal in every action of life. On the contrary, I have observed more frequent traits of affection for wife and children among them than are exhibited in the conduct of domestic affairs among the people of the lower, or Ba Congo country, who are not cannibals, nor addicted to the shedding of blood, save in religious matters.<sup>49</sup>

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In 1910, he mentioned again his preference for the ‘cannibals of the forest’ who, in his views, ‘were infinitely more sympathetic than the people of the open country, where the trading instinct is inborn’<sup>50</sup>. And he added, against all odds: ‘The cannibals are not schemers, and they are not mean. When they steal they generally grab. Though in direct opposition to all natural conjectures, they are among the best types of men, representing the most enlightened and enterprising of the Congo communities’.<sup>51</sup>

He also praised the artistic qualities of the Congolese, acknowledging that, Although such elements as lack of feeling, love of fighting, cruelty and general human degeneracy may be prominent attributes of the cannibals, it is surprising that a race so addicted to cannibalism living in a condition of anarchy and barbarism, should retain so striking an identity, and should possess so much taste for form and decoration, that they should be so readily amenable to reasoning, and so quick to avail themselves of improved conditions.<sup>52</sup>

Occasionally, he even indulged in the bucolic, Rousseauist depiction of village life, thus following a long trend of thought since the eighteenth century. But by locating the action in a ‘cannibal village’ – whether this assertion was true or not – , Ward surprised his late nineteenth-century readership. Better still, by choosing to emphasise the human-to-human connection that linked him to these central Congo “cannibals”, he abolished the irremediable otherness that the ingestion of human flesh has instituted in Western imagination for centuries, anthropophagy being considered as a ‘cultural antipode’ of humanity.<sup>53</sup> For instance, he depicts a settlement where

All is serene and calm; canoes with fishermen, or hunters returning from the chase of the wild pig in the woods of the larger islands, glide noiselessly in and out of the deeply shaded channels [...] – all combine to make up a scene of peaceful beauty that powerfully influences the mind of the beholder, and insensibly the white man, gazing on the good-tempered and smiling faces around him, forgets the cannibalism and cruelty that too often have darkened them ; forgets, too, his distant home with its cold, gray sky; and feels for the moment one in sympathy and accord with the human beings who surround him. <sup>54</sup>

His vision of the “Noble Savage” is at its peak when he states: ‘It is also true that they are naturally cruel, that they rob and murder, and even eat the bodies of their fellow man; but the fact must not be forgotten that they are not conscious of wrong in so doing. A Congo savage seldom does that which he feels intuitively to be wrong’.<sup>55</sup>

In his eyes, history and violence must account for the practise of anthropophagy in the region, ‘whether it originated or not from stress of adverse circumstances’; ‘They have never had

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a chance. Persecution has always been their heritage. First, they persecuted one another, and then they were persecuted by others’.<sup>56</sup> It is also from history, both collective and personal, that Ward draws his understanding for the “barbaric” predispositions of the Congolese forest inhabitants. His attention for context reinstates Africans back into history and de-essentialises cannibalism, which thus can be considered as an acquired trait, not an innate feature.

This standpoint is noticeable in the story of Ward’s encounter with Bulelu, a ‘member of the cannibal tribe of the Bangala’ whom he met in England in the 1890s. Herbert Ward asked him about his impressions about Great Britain and paid so much attention to his answers and personal story that he devoted an entire chapter to the young man.<sup>57</sup> He was notably impressed by Bulelu’s recollection of a traumatic childhood memory, a bloodbath which followed the attack of his village and several of his relatives’ deaths. Ward empathetically meditated on the young man’s fate: ‘I indulged in a momentary reflection upon the probable state of mind likely to be engendered in an African youth, accustomed from earliest infancy to view such sights, and to be surrounded by such associations as those depicted by Bulelu’.<sup>58</sup>

Adopting the internal point of view of an African interlocutor, and even more so, of a probable cannibal, is an attitude quite rare in the writings of nineteenth century Europeans. Here again, Herbert Ward’s openness to Africans and his ability to put himself in their place is fairly uncommon. However, as is often the case, Ward constantly oscillates between original, highly sensitive notations and trenchant judgements or well-worn stereotypes, considering that for Bulelu, ‘the killing of a wild animal in that far-off country is a far more memorable event than the slaughter of a human being’.<sup>59</sup> This oscillation is also visible in the following paragraph,

And yet there is nothing in this lad’s manner suggestive of a savage disposition; on the contrary, he appears gentle and kind. His voice was soft and musical, and his bearing is respectful. The only outward token of his barbarism, apart from the tribal mark, or “dikwala”, cicatrised upon his face, and his pointed teeth, was to be found in the peculiarly evasive expression of his bloodshot eyes.<sup>60</sup>

As we can see, it is impossible for Ward to extricate himself from colonial *topoi* and to escape well-worn *clichés* about the social psychology of race and ethnicity which were so common at the end of the nineteenth century. But at the same time as he offers unoriginal racializing explanations, he is able to put forward individual psychological explanations and historical observations that contextualize Bulelu’s emotions. Caught between his empathy for a young indigenous Congolese boy exiled in Britain, the sense of superiority he derives from his African

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experiences and his belonging to a small social group – the conquistadores of the Congo –, Ward proves to be a perplexing witness on many levels.

## Conclusion

Herbert Ward belongs to a second wave of Central African descriptions, contributing in the development of imperial histories about a region then in the process of a violent conquest. He also fits in a new literary sub-genre – that of cannibal stories – culminating in the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In this sense, Ward is just one of the many authors who have helped consolidate and propagate the idea of a Congo forest riddled with man-eaters of all kinds. He never questioned the reality of anthropophagy in the upper Congo and took it for a fact, as many others before and after him, identifying Congolese groups with a preconceived pattern of analysis. But he also took a, if not understanding at least empathetic, look at the so-called cannibals of Central Africa, always keeping in mind their humanity. The cannibal, ‘a figure associated with absolute alterity and used to enforce boundaries between a civilized “us” and savage “them”’, is precisely not considered by Ward as a total stranger.<sup>61</sup> Surprisingly for his time, he blurred the boundaries between “us” and “them” and placed one of his books under the auspices of an Ovid verse summoning the “Savages” – who could be in the end only the reflection of the “Civilised”.

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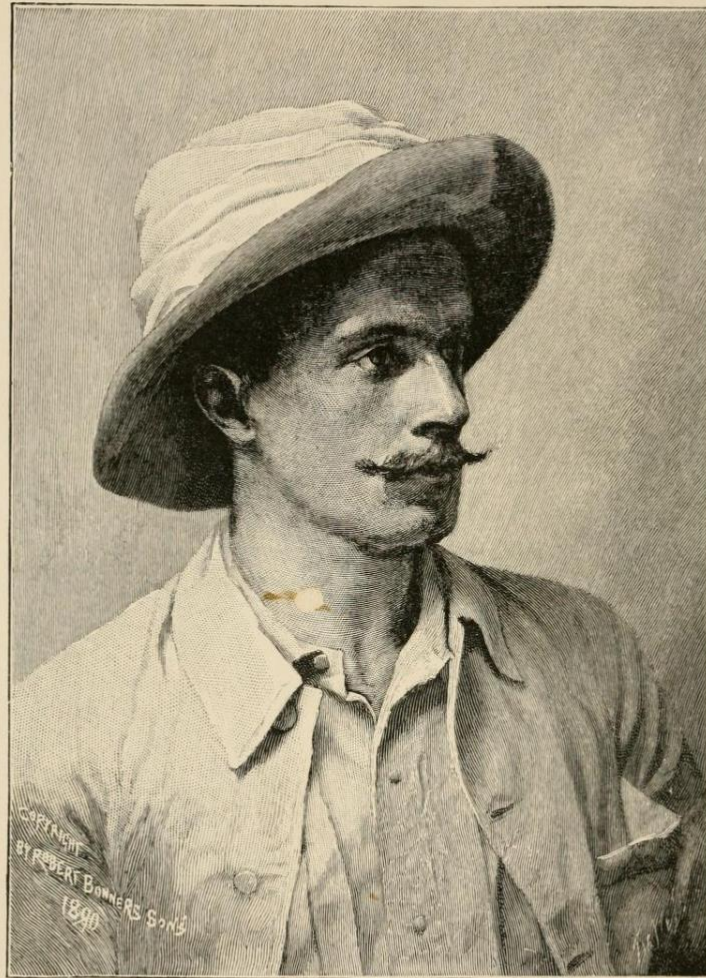
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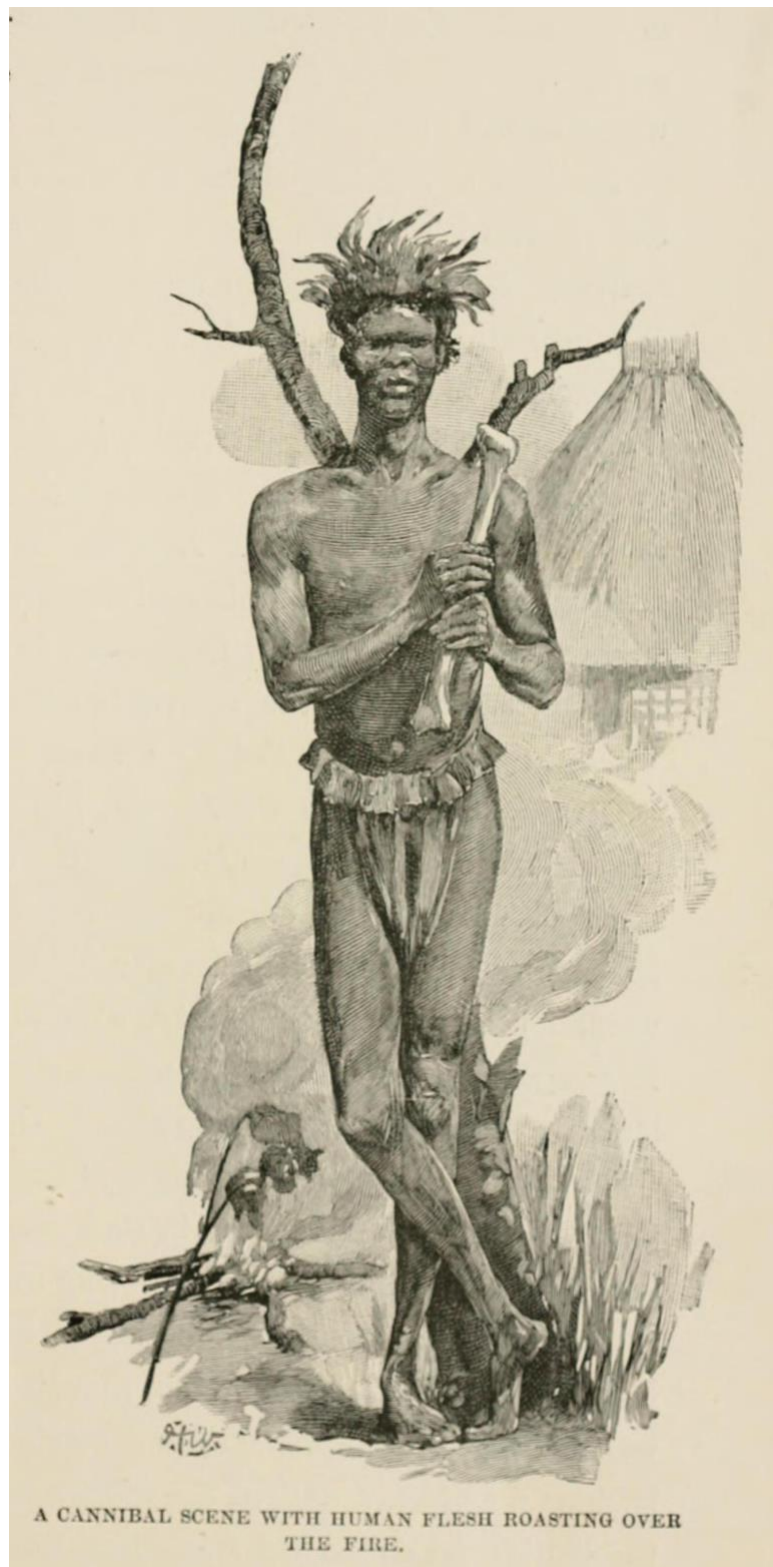


Sincerely Yours  
Herbert Ward.

Herbert Ward's portrait  
*Five Years with the Congo Cannibals*, 1890, p. II.

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A CANNIBAL SCENE WITH HUMAN FLESH ROASTING OVER THE FIRE.

*Five Years with the Congo Cannibals*, 1890, p. 161.

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<sup>1</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, *Preface*, vii.

<sup>2</sup> Barker, Hulme & Iversen, *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*; Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

<sup>3</sup> Estok, *Ecocriticism*, 158.

<sup>4</sup> Lestringant, *Le cannibale*; Seillan, *Sources du roman colonial*.

<sup>5</sup> Arzel, “Souverainetés”, 95.

<sup>6</sup> Van Bockhaven, *Leopard-Men*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Arzel, *Conquistadors*, 96; Ward Sarita, *A Valiant Gentleman*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Bibliographie Coloniale Belge*, 957.

<sup>9</sup> Arzel, *Conquistadors*, 78.

<sup>10</sup> The *International Association of the Congo* (in French: *Association internationale du Congo*), also known as the *International Congo Society*, was founded in 1879 by Leopold II of Belgium to further his interests in Central Africa. After 1885 Berlin Conference, the association and the territories it controlled were called *État indépendant du Congo* (ÉIC) (In English: The Congo Free State).

<sup>11</sup> Arzel, *Conquistadors*, 78; Ward Sarita, *A Valiant Gentleman*, 9-10. Henry Shelton Sanford established the expedition in 1886 to foster trade development along the upper Congo. Possessing special state concessions granted by Leopold II, Sanford’s company founded settlements at Kinshasa, Matadi, South Mancagues, Luebe and Equator, and brought the first commercial steamer over the cataracts to Stanley Pool”. See: James P. White: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700007064>

<sup>12</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Arzel, *Conquistadors*, 891.

<sup>14</sup> Arzel, *Conquistadors*, 879.

<sup>15</sup> Arzel, *Conquistadors*, 857-858.

<sup>16</sup> Arzel, *Conquistadors*, 857-858.

<sup>17</sup> *Bibliographie Coloniale Belge*, 962; Arzel, *Conquistadors*, 858.

<sup>18</sup> Arzel, *Conquistadors*.

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<sup>19</sup> Travellers and explorers are not exactly the same thing. An explorer is usually a person who has been commissioned (by a government, an association, a church, etc.) to discover an unknown territory, while a traveller is somebody who visits a territory for his/her own pleasure, often years after the country has been explored and conquered. For instance, Ward is a traveller when he describes lower Congo (an area where Westerners have been in contact with local peoples since the end of the 15th century) and he is an explorer when he takes part in the Emin Pacha relief mission.

<sup>20</sup> Evans-Pritchard, “Zande Cannibalism”, 251; Carmignani, *Gli Asandè o Niam-Niam*, 2-3.

<sup>21</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 260 and Ward, *Five Years*, 155.

<sup>22</sup> Goldman, *Anthropology of Cannibalism*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Pickering, “Consuming Doubts”; Hulme, “The Cannibal scene”; Obeyesekere, *Cannibal Talk*; Cambon, *L’anthropologie française*.

<sup>25</sup> Evans-Pritchard, “Zande Cannibalism”, 251.

<sup>26</sup> Hulme, “The Cannibal Scene”, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 289.

<sup>28</sup> Cambon, *L’anthropologie française*, 195.

<sup>29</sup> Lovejoy, *Transformations*; Manning, *Slavery*.

<sup>30</sup> Coquery-Vidrovitch, *L’Afrique et les Africains*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Arzel, “Sanglants trophées”, 79. All translations are mine, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>32</sup> Arzel, “Sanglants trophées”, 79-80.

<sup>33</sup> Van Bockhaven, *Leopard-Men*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

<sup>35</sup> Barker, Hulme & Iversen, *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Berhend, *Resurrecting Cannibals*.

<sup>37</sup> This expression is a reference to Nicholas Thomas book, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 134.

<sup>39</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 309.

<sup>40</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 309.

<sup>41</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 309.

<sup>42</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 156.

<sup>43</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 156-159.

<sup>44</sup> A travel companion of his.

<sup>45</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 162

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<sup>46</sup> Obeyesekere, *Cannibal Talk*.

<sup>47</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, *Preface*, vii.

<sup>48</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 141.

<sup>49</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 139.

<sup>50</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 308

<sup>51</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>52</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 308.

<sup>53</sup> Guille-Escuret, *Mangeurs d’autres*, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Ward, *Five Years*, 142.

<sup>55</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 226.

<sup>56</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 308 and 319.

<sup>57</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 201-206.

<sup>58</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 204.

<sup>59</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 204.

<sup>60</sup> Ward, *A Voice*, 204.

<sup>61</sup> Guest, “Cannibalism and Boundaries of Identity”, 2.