

The Hungry Cannibals

French Missionary Narratives about Lesotho in the 19th Century

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Many fantasies of violence are told on and in South Africa. The debate on traditional weapons, on the so called tradition of violence among the Zulu is a recurrent feature of political and intellectual debate. I want to tell you a fantasy of peace, the story of the Sotho king Moshoeshoe and his friends, the French calvinist missionaries. That Moshoeshoe was a remarkable man, who was able to keep his kingdom intact and to preserve its independence from the Boers, while becoming a British protectorate, a much lesser of two evils, is a well known fact: several biographies have been written of this great statesman, of whom Daniel Kunene, had this to say recently: " Moshoeshoe's desire to become a great king was as strong, if not quite as obsessive as that of his Zulu contemporary, Shaka. But what the latter sought to attain and perpetuate by war, Moshoeshoe built on a foundation of peace" (Kunene, 1989: 10).

Cannibals and calvinists have had a long association. They did not meet for the first time in Southern Africa, but in Brazil where an attempt at colonization led by Villegaignon in 1555 ended up in a miserable failure. The colonizers returned to France and wrote stories of their attempt. One of them met with my fellow tribesman, Montaigne, and told him about the charming natives he had encountered there. Apart from the fact that they were cannibals they seemed perfectly good fellows. The happy savage was born, and has been with us for a long time largely thanks to Montaigne's essay, chapter 31, on the Cannibals. It was the only book to be known to belong to Shakespeare who quotes it in *The Tempest*. Many centuries later Claude Lévi Strauss considered their "relativistic" remarks to be the "Bible of the ethnologist" (1955) and Michel De Certeau (1975) wrote a very cogent study of the calvinist reaction to cannibals, these absolute others, in Jean de Léry's narrative. Three propositions emerge from these stories: the first is that these happy people, who happen to be cannibals, the Tupinambas, should be left at peace, and that no attempt should be made to convert them; Montaigne liked that part. The second proposition was that no attempt should be made at a conversion, since anyway, "We Calvinists" are the chosen people; Montaigne was too cautious and too much of a sceptic to have anything to say on that. As for the third part it appears in Protestant war time polemics against Catholics: the real cannibals, in any case, are the Catholics, who eat the body of Christ and believe in Transubstantiation. Our Nineteenth century calvinists, sent to Africa, were missionaries, believed in conversion, were not rabid anticatholics, and probably had a rather different view of the Body of Christ, than that of the first Fundamentalist protestant colonizers of Brazil. The congregation of natives had a theological meaning for them.

an original corpus

Mary Louise Pratt defines thus the main characteristics of the travel type of narratives: using as an example J. Barrow's book on Southern Africa, published in the beginning of the nineteenth century. According to her it exemplifies a kind of division of labor common to much travel writing of his time, and of much latter, since she quotes for instance Richard Burton, in which "the main narrative deals with landscape, while indigenous people are represented separately in descriptive portraits... (Pratt, 1985:126) and "The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective "they", which is distilled even further into an iconic he-they standardized adult male specimen. The abstracted he-they is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense which characterizes anything he or she does not as a particular historical event but as an instance of a pre-given custom" (Pratt, 1985:120).

The fall of marxism as a secular religion should not leave us with a legacy of macro ideological denunciations. Livingstone was not Stanley, and this does matter; all missionaries were not appointed representatives of State interests. Some were guests of African kings and such was the case of the French protestant mission to Lesotho, which had come upon the request of the Sotho king Moshoeshoe.

Lesotho, as you know, is totally surrounded by South Africa; it is walled on the east by the Drakensberg which rises from the lowlands extending along the Indian Ocean, and on the west by the Orange and Caledon rivers; it is mostly mountainous in the east, while the western part used to be the bread basket of the Orange free State in the Nineteenth century and as such was the object of Boer lust for land; in the twentieth century Sotho men went

to work in the mines. Agriculture no longer played an important part in the economy of the kingdom. The dynasty Moshoeshe had established continued to reign, if not to rule .

Along with Swaziland, Lesotho is one of the few kingdoms where a precolonial monarchy was able to survive: the astute politics of Moshoeshe who reigned for several decades, have a lot to do with this fact; he called in missionaries to teach and eventually to preach the gospel; these missionaries were from the Paris Evangelical Mission . Moshoeshe had no objection against the Gospel, but he felt it was not proper to the king to abandon the religion of his ancestors, while he left many of his subjects become christians; he wanted the missionaries to teach his people and first he wanted them to see his country . That is why he took the young Arbousset on a tour of his country in 1840. This resulted in a book, which is the first description of many parts of Lesotho, *Missionary excursion*, recently translated into english from a french unpublished manuscript (1991). Many of the references to places and people will be taken from this book and from the excellent edition produced by D.Ambrose and A.Bruhsh

This narrative was followed by several others, written by the same group of missionaries; one of the many interesting features of these narratives is the recurrence of the cannibal motive, with a wealth of details and comments seldom found elsewhere. The cannibal, with the notable exception of Montaigne was, in travel and ethnographic literature, that ultimate other: the man who has become an animal, because he eats his own kind. It has been a very old fantasy that Africa was also a land of cannibals; as Michel Leiris puts it in his travel narrative *l'Afrique fantôme*: " Voici enfin l'Afrique . La terre à 50° à l'ombre, des convois d'esclaves, des festins cannibales..." (Leiris 1936: 225) . Michel Leiris would have been partially disappointed in Lesotho where there is, at times snow, no slaves , but his fantasy of cannibal meals would have been amply satisfied if we believe our missionaries.

Of cannibalism in Africa, Livingstone had this to say : " As a Scottish judge would say: not proven" (quoted in Arens, 1979); these French missionaries would have certainly disagreed with this comment, and their writings have been considered , until today, as reliable sources for the history of Lesotho. It is thus necessary to place the instances of cannibalism which are reported in a specific narrative context and to understand that they do fulfil a narrative function, as well as a theological and a political function: in short we go from fantasy to collusion in dealing with the other, either the Mosotho or with the cannibal.

The source of our information will be the three books recently reprinted by the Morija Archives, which are the only historical museum in Lesotho today and are still run by the church founded by the Paris Evangelical Mission .

The first book is *Missionary Excursion* by Arbousset, written in 1837, never printed before. The second is by Casalis, also a member of the first group of missionaries who arrived in 1836, author of the first grammar of the sotho language and of a comprehensive book on the Basutos, titled *The Basutos*, published in french in 1856, translated into english in 1861 and reprinted in 1992; the third book is by D.F. Ellenberger, who arrived in the sixties of last century, and was to spend the rest of his life collecting sotho genealogies; he died before he could see his work into print and the whole project was eventually translated and published by his son in law in 1912, and has also been reprinted as *History of the Basutos*.

There has been a most interesting sequel to these writings: the creation of a literature in sesotho, first narrating oral stories, remembering the old times and then graduating slowly to novels and to the creation of a universal masterpiece such as *Chaka* by Thomas Mofolo. Among the first books written by Basothos in sesotho cannibal stories are remarkable : *Mehla ea Madimo* (in french : au temps des cannibales, in the times of cannibals) by E. Motsamai has been a long time bestseller, printed first in 1912, and running its 12th printing in 1992. Another book by James Machobane, a younger sotho writer, published in 1946, and also constantly reprinted, tells stories of Ancien Lesotho and gives a prominent place to cannibals: *Mahaheng a matso* (in french : les cavernes sombres, the dark caves)

The translator of many sotho books was V.Ellenberger, son of D.F., to whose manuscripts I gained access, thanks to Paul, his own son, also an authority on Lesotho: family continuity is certainly a protestant asset in missionary work! These books have not yet been published in any other language, but thanks to a second generation missionary, V. Ellenberger, born in Lesotho, translator of Mofolo, son of D. F. Ellenberger, author of the standard history of the Basuto, using genealogies and oral tradition, reprinted recently, there exists a French unpublished translation of the first eight novels written in sesotho . I should also mention that J.Molumeli , head of the Department of French at the University of Lesotho, is doing a complete study of these works and of the contribution of V. Ellenberger and that I owe Jamari many thanks for bringing me several times to Lesotho and allowing me, under the enthusiastic and erudite guidance of David Ambrose to visit some of these caves

The most comprehensive historical work is the historical study by D.F.Ellenberger. It is a pioneering work in the sense that it is probably one of the first historical books composed in the nineteenth century to treat oral history as worthy of the historian's attention. However D.F.Ellenberger was not an academic historian and was

not involved in theoretical disputes about methodologies; in a way he invented a methodology that suited his own practical purpose of knowledge, and that fitted very well within the sotho concept of history, and by doing thus he became far ahead of his time. He collected and organized genealogies and claimed to go back almost 800 years. Events of the previous decades of the century, especially the time of the wars started by Chaka's Zulu expansionism - and by saying this I am not taking any side in the historical discussion now going on in South Africa about the Zulu role in Difekane, the chaotic period of the first decades of the nineteenth century, but merely stating the interpretation given by a well informed and well meaning observer at the time- were of course very well documented and instances of cannibalism do occur very often in his book. This is so to such an extent that he felt necessary to dedicate a whole chapter of his history to the topic, in which he tried to provide his reader with a synthetic view of the matter.

The pleasure of the text: the narrative function

" Hunger was the first cannibal" writes Arbousset in 1836, without giving more details !, to which Ellenberger adds:

Cannibalism is a sort of mental aberration brought about by the pangs of hunger which render a man incapable of realising the horror of it, or of anything except his own suffering and misery. Those who became addicted to it formed themselves into secret associations , as much to justify themselves as to encourage others. (Ellenberger, 1912: 217).

This is the definition given by the historian of the Basutos; the time of desolation was the Difakane and provided a context for the development of this stress-induced pathology. But what are the roots in the culture of that type of behaviour? Not all people become cannibals in time of stress, so the general explication has to be completed with a sort of historical explanation: " It is improbable that the the idea of eating their fellow men would have occurred to the South African Bantu had the example not been set by strangers from the North " (Ellenberger, 1912: 217). A most interesting comment indeed, sending us back to the "heart of darkness" and which could be a bit contradictory with the practical explanation given earlier.

The causes and supposed origin of this practice being asserted, it is certainly true that the writers tend to take a facetious pleasure in reporting cases of cannibalism. Missionaries like to sprinkle their narratives with a zest of humor:

Though the power of Moshoeshoe was always used to its full extent to stop cannibalism wherever his authority extended it still existed in out of the way places, and as late as 1836 Mr Arbousset visited some cannibals in order to preach to them . He was fat and well liking, and these epicures made no secret of the fact that, had he not been Moshoeshoe missionary, they would gladly have devoured him (Ellenberger, 1912: 228).

Some stories are told with a wonderful tongue in cheek zest: otherwise what would the impact of anecdotes such as the following upon the average French reader of the time and especially on prospective applicants to the seminary?

During the war between the Boers and Basuto in 1865-8 an old man, the son of a cannibal and a cannibal himself in his youth, created a most painful impression upon the writer and his wife by repeatedly telling them that, should the war last much longer and starvation ensue, he and his companions would resort to human meat , and that they would begin by eating white people. When asked why white people? he replied, Because they ate salt, sugar, and other nice things and their flesh would be better seasoned . He accompanied this explanation with suggestive signs, licking his lips, and showing a fine set of voracious-looking teeth, while his companions who were evidently not without appetite for such a feast, joined him in a very hearty laugh...(Ellenberger, 1912: 224).

Missionaries seem to delight in depicting the cannibals as ogres: here is a song, collected by Arbousset in 1836 and often quoted, that the cannibals used to sing while dancing round a victim before dispatching him or her:

*We are cannibals , we eat people
We eat thee, we eat people
We eat the brains of a dog
And that of a little child
We eat the fingers of people
We eat the fat of mankind
Thou toy of the man eaters
Thou delicious morsel*

Strike, strike him down, my comrades

(Ellenberger D.F, 1912: 223)

These anecdotes, this lightness in dealing with such a horrible topic was of course a good rhetorical device, making the missionaries appear even more heroic in the middle of such horrors. They were accused of lying by a contemporary traveller, M. Delegorgue, also French and probably jealous of their successes, in particular the "discovery" of the sources of the Orange and Vaal river at the Mont aux Sources, still named in French. Their critic questioned the very presence of cannibals in Southern Africa: "M Delegorgue," writes Casalis, in *The Basutos* (1861:22) "denied that cannibalism has ever existed in South Africa and has attributed what we have said to the desire of giving a dramatic interest to our recital". The charges are no more mentioned: M. Delegorgue has not visited the land of the Basutos and that is a sufficient answer. It is nonetheless interesting that "dramatic interest" was attributed in the narratives to the presence of cannibals. In some instances longer stories are quoted, always collected from Sotho people having had an association with cannibals. The following story is worth quoting and commenting at length, since it shows the ambiguity of the anthropological status of the cannibals.

As the story goes, a man named Mapike had been deputed to ransom the wife of a chief who had been abducted by cannibals. Six oxen were supposed to be the price of the ransom. The cannibals, true to their reputation, live in an immense cavern, far in the mountain; on their way the deputies meet some women who have been gathering roots and who tell them that the woman will be given back. The picture darkens considerably when the emissaries see a swollen hand sticking out of a pot and when they enter the cavern: "nothing was to be seen but skulls and broken bones...". Soon afterward the cannibals come back with their prey: a young man "well formed and handsome", whom they drive in shouting "Wah! wah! as the Basutos do when they drive a herd of oxen..." The young handsome man is quickly disposed of in front of them and "the cutting up was performed just as if it had been an ox". Needless to say the emissaries don't feel very safe and want to depart, but they are told to wait and to spend the night in the cavern. They take some "baked flour" from their haversack, as good Bantu agriculturalists should do and "lay down as near as possible to each other". The next day their woman friend is given back against the oxen, which is, according to the cannibals a great favour "as six oxen were not of equal value to the young woman". The conclusion of this little story is at the same time surprising and anticlimatic: "Makara was delighted to see his wife once more, but she soon escaped from him, and returned of her own accord to the den from which he had rescued her. She had found friends there and had acquired a taste for human flesh..." We are not told whether the six oxen were sent back, which would have signaled the reintegration of the cannibals in the Sotho community through this strange matrimonial exchange, but this is nonetheless what happens since the ogres do business with the men and do not despise oxen, even though they may prefer human flesh. These monsters are redeemable, they may even find some young woman to like them. Cannibal stories can be fun but they can also instruct and some of them fulfill what I call a theological function.

Theological function

Cannibalism is one of the defining criteria of the non human. The meeting of Caribbean cannibals by Colon and the practices of the Aztecs helped fuel a controversy best exemplified in the famous Valladolid meeting between Sepulveda and Las Casas. T. Todorov has written a very cogent analysis of the issues involved and I will try to see how well they fit in our Southern African context. The extraordinary thing is that these cannibals speak the same language as the non cannibals. Cannibalism is a regression on the road to animality, but it is not yet animality. As far as two legged animals were concerned there were other candidates: the Bushmen speaking a bizarre language, very short people, living in caves, hunted down like animals by Bantu and Boers alike. In their caves Bushmen painted; they did what no animal could do. Their absence is conspicuous in these narratives, and that may be a reflection of their near extinction at the time, or that our missionaries had found their own, even wilder savages. The cannibals were taking the place of the bushmen in the rock shelters and caverns; but the cannibals were not skilled hunters, they could not run very fast, they did not paint: they were failed agriculturalists, incapable of growing sorghum. In the Sotho books written from stories collected in oral tradition, cannibals are certainly part of a ferocious natural landscape, along with lions and other predators.

The message of the story of the young woman is also there : you become a cannibal. This means that you can also be rescued from cannibalism; the part that is human in you can be salvaged: Moshoeshoe understood that, and the missionaries give him ample credit for his intelligence.

One of the most interesting stories narrated by Ellenberger and collected in the course of his field work deals with the purification of Moshoeshoe grandfather's grave. The band of cannibals, led by Rakotosoane living in Penane, the first cave Arbousset visited in 1836, still accessible today, had eaten Peete, Moshoeshoe's grandfather, in 1824. As a consequence of this most unfortunate incident, there was no grave to purify. As we are told, when Moshoeshoe's heir reached circumcision's age, a unique problem was posed: it was impossible to circumcise while the ancestor's grave remained in a state of defilement. What was to be done? The cannibals were summoned to appear at Thaba Bosiu, where Moshoeshoe's seat of power was, and they were very much afraid: many among the Basutos wanted their death.

"But this was not to Moshoeshoe's mind. At that time he could ill afford to lose any man, so, bringing to bear the ingenuity which rarely failed him at critical moments..., he observed that to his mind the better plan would be to rub the purification offal over them all, as to all intent and purposes they were the tomb of the departed... The chief's view of the matter prevailed and next morning an ox was killed, and the ceremony of purification carried out in due form, Rakotosoane and his companions being treated as a grave and their lives being spared..." (Ellenberger, 1912 : 228).

Moshoeshoe ingenuity borders on a kind of theological genius: the congregation of cannibals is the virtual body of the nation, as the congregation of Christians is the body of Christ. Without knowing it, Moshoeshoe discovers one of the basic tenets of Christian doctrine through his treatment of the destitute among the destitutes. Cannibals provide a testing ground for ideas about redemption, on a human plane, it is true, but with a little help from his friends Moshoeshoe may be able to graduate to Christian love. The collusion between the king and the missionary becomes more obvious and this is what I would like to call the political function of the motive.

Political function

On a more mundane level we can understand that Moshoeshoe, as a good king, endeavoured to restore tranquility; his first care was to suppress cannibalism. As Casalis tells us: *"Those of his subjects who were innocent of this horrible practice were disposed to treat the guilty with rigour. Moshoeshoe saw that this would incur the horrors of civil war, and tend to depopulate still more a land already almost destitute of inhabitants. He knew also that cannibalism not being the result of national customs and traditions must in reality be repugnant to those even who indulged in it. He therefore answered that men-eaters were living sepulchres and that no one could fight with sepulchres..."* (Casalis, 1861:)

The narrator adds this comment which points to the community of focus between Moshoeshoe and the missionaries: "there are critical moments in the fate of nations, when a word suffices to introduce a new era".

A picture of the good ruler emerges: he does not "eat the power whole", as the Zairian proverb tells us in J. Fabian recent book (1990). Cannibal power is the present day metaphor for autocratic despotic rule. Bokassa was accused of eating school children; even if the charges were not substantiated, suspicious meat parts were found in his frige and the stigma is continuously attached to him. In 1986 the winner of the Grand prix littéraire de l'Afrique noire was a novel with the title *Cannibale* proposing a new metaphor of power: absolute power is the power to eat your own subjects. Central Africa is always the origin of those fantasy: even the habit of our Basutos was given to them by the Venda people who trace their origin to Kasai, in today's Zaire. "One traveller was told by the Arabs that many of the Congolese whom they formerly took as slaves deserved their fate since they were cannibals..." (Arens, 1979:84)

Moshoeshoe's goal is repeatedly emphasized: it is to return the cannibals to the society of men, to have them as loyal subjects, not to treat them as the animals they have become. Cannibals are a figure of the violence of power, for what Jean-François Bayard has very aptly called the "politics of the belly". Bokassa, Amin, Mobutu have almost literally eaten their country, eaten up its resources, killed its men and women: they have cannibalized their own place, and it does not matter whether the accusations of actual cannibalism are substantiated: they provide examples of extremes of violence and dehumanization that make actual cannibalism quite irrelevant. But the image of the power as all devouring ogre remains. If we reverse entirely this proposition we can appreciate in Moshoeshoe the prototype of the good ruler trying to humanize his own people, to take them away from cannibalism, and to convert them to agriculture, and may be later to Christianity. By using as a narrative implement the "cannibal motive" missionaries provide the background

against which we can see their own efforts at christianization, along with the king's efforts at humanization. The device is very effective and does indeed create a dramatic tension in the story- a tale needs ogres- as well as a political synergy in their mission: the villains are indeed very vile, but they can be rescued .

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