



THE VIDEO PROVES THEY'RE ALL CANNIBALS: THE WEAPONISATION OF RITUALISTIC CANNIBALISM IN CAMEROON'S AND NIGERIA'S (ANTI) SEPARATIST PROPAGANDA

Video, Hepsinin Yamyam Olduğunu Kanıtlıyor: Kamerun ve Nijerya'nın (Anti) Ayrılıkçı Propagandasında Ritüel Yamyamlığın Silaha Dönüştürülmesi

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ABSTRACT

For some decades now, the Cameroonian and Nigerian governments have been involved in a complex information war against some armed separatist movements operating in their respective countries. This longstanding war has partly been characterised by the use of gloomy Internet videos that represent the separatist fighters as war crimes perpetrators, human right violators, terrorists and barbaric forces. In line with this, the Cameroon and Nigeria governments have, at various points in time, sought to establish separatist movements' barbarism by deploying some footage of ritualistic cannibalism presumably committed by separatist fighters. The two governments have hinged on such damning – but not always authenticated – online images to justify their demonization of separatism and intensify their military response to secessionism on their national territories. Although a number of authors have focused on the truth-claim of such cannibalism videos, no modicum of scholarly attention has particularly been given to why the aforementioned cannibalism videos have, irrespective of their authenticity, enjoyed a certain popularity and “credibility” among the gullible Cameroonian and Nigerian masses. This paper addresses this understudied issue through two objectives. First, it examines the ways in which both separatist and anti-separatist movements in Cameroon and Nigeria weaponised cannibalism videos in their violent struggles against their opponent. Second, the paper explores the socio-cultural factors that enable the popularity and “credibility” of cannibalism videos among the masses in the two countries.

Keywords: ritualistic cannibalism, separatism, Ambazonia, indigenous people of Biafra, Ambazonia defence forces.

Öz

Son birkaç on yıldır Kamerun ve Nijerya hükümetleri, kendi ülkelerinde faaliyet gösteren silahlı ayrılıkçı hareketlere karşı karmaşık bir enformasyon savaşı yürütmekte-

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dir. Bu uzun süredir devam eden savaş, kısmen ayrılıkçı savaşçıları savaş suçu işleyen, insan haklarını ihlal eden, terörist ve barbar güçler olarak gösteren karanlık internet videolarının kullanımıyla karakterize edilmiştir. Bu doğrultuda, Kamerun ve Nijerya hükümetleri çeşitli dönemlerde, ayrılıkçı savaşçılar tarafından işlendiği iddia edilen ritüelistik yamyamlık görüntülerini kullanarak bu hareketlerin barbarlığını kanıtlamaya çalışmışlardır. Her iki hükümet de bu tür suçlayıcı çevrimiçi görüntülere dayanarak ayrılıkçılığı şeytanlaştırmayı ve kendi topraklarındaki ayrılıkçılığa karşı askeri müdahalelerini yoğunlaştırmayı meşrulaştırmaya çalışmıştır. Bazı yazarlar bu yamyamlık videolarının gerçeklik iddialarına odaklanmış olsa da, söz konusu videoların –gerçek olup olmadıklarına bakılmaksızın– Kamerunlu ve Nijeryalı saf kitleler arasında neden belli bir popülerlik ve “inandırıcılık” kazandığı konusu akademik açıdan neredeyse hiç ele alınmamıştır. Bu makale, yeterince çalışılmamış bu konuyu iki hedef doğrultusunda ele almaktadır. İlk olarak, Kamerun ve Nijerya’daki hem ayrılıkçı hem de ayrılıkçı karşıtı hareketlerin, rakiplerine karşı yürüttükleri şiddetli mücadelede yamyamlık videolarını nasıl silah olarak kullandıklarını incelemektedir. İkinci olarak ise, söz konusu videoların her iki ülkedeki halk arasında popülerlik ve “inandırıcılık” kazanmasını mümkün kılan sosyokültürel etkenleri araştırmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: ritüel yamyamlık, ayrılıkçılık, Ambazonia, Biafra yerli halkları, Ambazonia savunma kuvvetleri.

Introduction

Since the independence period, separatist and insurgent groups have represented a serious threat to the corporate existence of many countries across Africa. In Nigeria and Cameroon in particular, these groups have for long, not only challenged government’s authority through armed struggles but also deployed web-based campaigns aimed at tarnishing government’s image on both national and international stages. In Cameroon for instance, armed separatist movements such as the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF) and the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces among others, have since 2017 taken up arms to fight Cameroon’s regular army in view of creating a break-away state called Ambazonia. Their longstanding struggle has variously been named the Ambazonia War, the NOSO Crisis, the Anglophone Crisis or Anglophone War.¹ In neighbouring Nigeria, a similar scenario has been observed over the years. Insurgent groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) have violently led calls for the secession of the Biafra (south eastern Nigeria) from the Nigerian Federa-

¹ For more on the Cameroon Ambazonia War, see (Human Right Watch, 2022; Mudge, 2020; Endong, 2024).

tion. These groups have, for decades, been fighting for the independence of the ethnic Igbo people of eastern Nigeria. In the course of their struggle, the aforementioned Cameroonian and Nigerian secessionist groups have deployed strategies that range from guerrilla attacks and perceived esotericism to terrorism and online disinformation (Ojo 2024; Endong & Obi, 2022).²

In response to the separatist movements' violent activities, both the Cameroonian and Nigerian governments have not hesitated to supplement their anti-secessionist military efforts with systematic propaganda. This propaganda has partly been characterised by the use of gloomy online footage that represent the separatist fighters as war crime perpetrators, human right violators and barbaric forces. In line with this, the Cameroon and Nigeria governments have at various points in time, sought to establish separatist movements' untold barbarism and terrorism by deploying some (online) footage of ritualistic cannibalism presumably committed by separatist fighters on the war front. The two governments have actually hinged on such damning – but not always authenticated – online images to justify their demonization or proscription of separatism as well as the intensification of their military response to secessionism on their national territories. Although a number of authors have focused on the truth-claim of the aforementioned cannibalism videos (see Endong, 2023; 2024; Human Right Watch, 2021; 2022; Kindzeka, 2021; Mudge, 2020; 2021), no modicum of scholarly attention has particularly been given to understanding or explaining why the videos have, irrespective of their doubtful and controversial nature, enjoyed a certain popularity and “credibility” among the Cameroonian and Nigerian masses.

This paper addresses this understudied issue through a critical analysis of recent weaponisation of cannibalism videos in Cameroon's Ambazonia War and IPOB separatist struggle in Nigeria. Using critical observations, documentary analysis and phenomenology, the paper attains two principal objectives. First, the paper examines the ways in which both separatist and anti-separatist movements in Cameroon and Nigeria weaponise cannibalism videos in their violent struggles against their respective opponents. Second, the paper explores the socio-cultural factors that enable the popularity and “apparent credibility” of cannibalism videos among the masses in the two countries.

² For more on separatist struggles in Nigeria, see (Ojo, 2024, Endong & Obi, 2022).

Research Methodology

This paper hinged on the descriptive research design. By definition, a descriptive research seeks to determine the characteristics of a phenomenon or population without manipulation of variables or hypothesis testing (Aggarwal and Ranganathan, 2019). It entails making observations and comparing and analysing relevant data. In line with this, the present study actually sought to determine the characteristics of government's and separatist movements' use of cannibalism video shared on social media for their respective propaganda. The paper relied on three principal methods of data collection and analysis namely documentary analysis, critical observations and phenomenology. Documentary analysis consisted in extracting relevant data from a variety of secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, encyclopaedias, book chapters, policy papers, newspaper articles, working papers and online contents among others. Still as part of this documentary analysis, the paper considered relevant videos whose contents were qualitatively analysed. The paper exploited the contents of over eight videos documenting various episodes of the NOSO Crisis and IPOB struggle. Of the eight videos considered for the study, three show acts of cannibalism purportedly committed by Nigerian and Cameroonian separatist fighters. The three videos were the few ones available during the time of the study. This researcher used the videos, more as empirical evidence to support claims related to government mobilisation of cannibalism videos in its anti-separatist visual propaganda. As earlier mentioned, the intension was not to analyse frequencies of specific cannibalism-related issues, but simply to demonstrate that some videos deployed by government to tarnish the image of their opponents evoke cannibalism and barbarism. The videos considered for the study – particularly the ones on cannibalism – are at first sight horrible. For ethical reasons, the cannibalism videos used in the work to illustrate visual propaganda were accompanied by relevant captions and notes to explain the context in which the presumed cannibal acts were perpetrated and how authentic they are.

The critical observations part of the methodology consisted in deploying the senses to collect data. The study also used relevant empirical evidence drawn from recent events and observable trends to support the claims made in the paper. Additionally, phenomenology was used to address the second main objective of the paper which focused on examining the socio-cultural factors that may enable the popularity and “apparent credibility” of cannibalism videos among the masses in the two countries.

By definition, phenomenological research is the study of the life world as we immediately experience it, pre-reflexively rather than as we conceptualise, theorise, categorise or reflect on it. In the words of Adams and Manen (2021), it is the “the study of lived or experiential meaning and attempts to describe and interpret these meanings in the ways that they emerge and are shaped by consciousness, language, our cognitive and non-cognitive sensibilities, and by our pre-understandings and presuppositions” (2021: 401). In this study attention was given to how certain West African myths about cannibalism may push Cameroonian and Nigerian masses to believe the online images suggesting rebel forces’ cannibalism.

Online Videos as Weapon in the Cameroon and Nigeria Separatist Struggles

Over the years, the government and separatist groups in both Cameroon and Nigeria have been opposed in a complex information war which has mainly taken place in the cyber space. Each side to this war has, in several instances used visual propaganda to either attempt to intimidate or negatively frame their opponent. In some cases, such use of propaganda has ultimately been to win the hearts of both national and international audiences. In April 2018 for instance, an online video showing the burning of a village called Azi – a locality situated in the English speaking region of Cameroon – emerged on the internet. The authors of the burning shown in the video were unidentifiable men in military fatigues, helmets and webbing. Separatists quickly capitalised on the fact that the aggressors’ uniforms were consistent with those often worn by Cameroon’s Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) – an elite army unit – to attribute the attack to the Cameroon armed forces. These separatist movements subsequently hinged on the controversial video to associate the Cameroon defence forces and government with genocide, barbarism and extremism.

On December 8, 2021, another video showing the remains of over 35 shops and houses in Bengwi (a locality situated in the North West Region of Cameroon) surfaced on the internet. According to some eyewitnesses (cited in Human Right Watch, 2021), the houses and shops were swiftly burnt in the course of a reprisal action undertaken by the Cameroonian army. The reprisal action followed an attack by the Ambazonia Defence Forces (a separatist group) that led to the destruction of a tactical vehicle deployed by the army in the locality. According to the aforementioned eyewitnesses, the separatist fighters used an Improvised Explosive Device to destroy the army’s tactical vehicle. In retaliation, Cameroon’s army launched an im-

promptus raid along the Bengwi road, cracking down on any civilian suspected to collaborate with separatist forces and burning down businesses and houses. Besides the wanton destruction of the built environment, the retaliation led to many human victims and other atrocities. The army denied the eyewitnesses' version of the story. In a press release, it (the army) rather claimed that the ravaging fire that destroyed the shops and businesses was the outcome of an explosion that followed BIR's attack on a separatist military hardware (Atonfack, 2021). In spite of army's rebuttal, many separatist movements hinged on the Bengwi incident to tax the Cameroon government and the regular army with genocide.

Like their Cameroonian counterparts, Nigerian separatist groups have deployed video-based propaganda to negatively frame the Nigerian government. On February 8, 2024 for instance, some activists alleged to be IPOB members, used a 54-second video of people filming boats on fire, to suggest that the Nigerian army committed various blunders in the southern Nigerian State of Delta. In an X post, the activists brandished the aforementioned footage as evidence that the Nigerian army burned some Niger Delta villages, in retaliation for the death of 16 Nigerian soldiers who were on mission in the area to quench land disputes opposing two local communities.

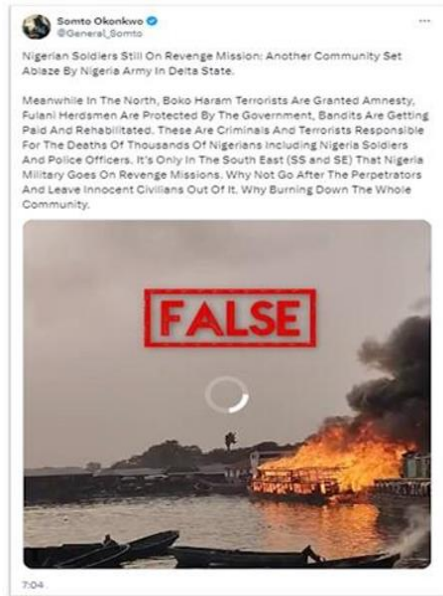


Plate 1. Niger Delta Killings Video Flagged as False by the AFP on its Website

The Nigerian army swiftly denied allegations of revenge attacks launched against local Delta State communities. Liked more than 12000

times, the video was soon fact-checked by *Agence France Press* (AFP) and found to be false (Flanagan, 2024). Actually, the video used by the separatists rather shows a January blaze that took place in neighbouring River State of Nigeria (see Plate 1). According to Flanagan (2024), IPOB deployed the misleading video to “further stoke tensions in the southern region” of Nigerian.

Similar to their separatist opponents, the Cameroonian and Nigerian governments have, in return and in different instances, weaponised online videos to negatively frame separatist movements operating in their respective countries. On August 11, 2020 for instance, a video showing three Cameroonian separatist fighters torturing a 35-years old woman to death emerged on the Internet. In the repulsive video, the separatist fighters are seen dragging their victim over the ground. The victim (a certain Comfort Thumassang, suspected by the separatists for her collaboration with the Cameroonian army) is heard pleading profusely – but in vain – for mercy. Shortly after being dragged on the ground, the pleader is gruesomely beheaded by the assassins. While cutting the throat of their victim with a machete, one of the assassins is heard saying “Fine Play”, a Pidgin expression for “well done”.

As anyone would have expected, the Thumassang video rapidly became viral on the Internet. It soon featured in information bulletins over elite-television stations – notably *Afrique Media*, Canal 2 and CRTV – in Cameroon and abroad, causing waves of indignation and condemnation even among some Cameroonian separatist groups. The Cameroonian government capitalised on the repulsive contents of the video to frame the separatist movements as terrorist and barbaric forces.

The Nigerian government has used similar anti-separatist campaigns against groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its armed wing called the Eastern Security Networks (ESN). Such campaigns have logically followed the advent of gloomy online footage of cannibalism and voodoo rituals committed by secessionist movements in Nigeria. These cannibalism videos and campaigns will be addressed in greater details in the subsequent parts of this paper.

Videoed Cannibalism as Visual Propaganda in Cameroon and Nigeria Separatist Struggles

The history of armed separatist movements and insurgencies in Africa is remarkably characterised by various forms of cannibalism. In effect,

many 1990s and early 2000s rebellion movements in such places as Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo have been marked by reported incidences of cannibalism committed by rebel forces (Thomas, 2017). The Cameroon Ambazonia War and the IPOB separatist struggle in Nigeria have not been exempted from this old trend. In effect, a number of videos suggesting the cannibalistic penchant of some Nigerian and Cameroonian separatist groups have emerged on the Internet. Some of these videos have been authenticated, while others have been proven false and misleading. This section provides a critical examination of the ways in which these videos have been used in government's or separatist movements' propaganda.

Otherwise called man-eating or anthropophagy, cannibalism is a situation where a person eats human flesh. Such act of flesh-eating may be driven by varied motives some of which include survival, ritual and pleasure. In line with this plurality of motives, authors have identified at least four types of cannibalism namely "cannibalism for survival", ritual(istic) cannibalism, epicurean cannibalism and "soul eating" (Klose & Thulin, 2016; Islam, 2011; Brown, 2013; Duggan, 2013; Kirkaldy, 2005). Cannibalism for survival and pleasure has been observed among the ancient Melanesian where human flesh used to be considered a type of food, and equated with animal flesh. The Melanesians even used the term "*long pig*" in reference to human flesh. Similarly, the Batak of Sumatra are said to have developed the culture of selling human flesh in their markets, before they came under the Dutch colonial rule. Similarly, in Nigeria, a number of peoples in tribal days practiced cannibalism for pleasure. Hinging on a series of 1903 travel literature about ancient Nigerian tribes, Jones (2014) contends that cannibalism was "the pride and joy" of some ancient Nigerian tribes, notably the Dewo people of south western Nigeria. According to the researcher's findings, these Dewo people particularly like eating the flesh of their Yoruba counterparts. Jones, relays the writing of an ancient author who says: "if anyone goes to visit [Dewo towns], and that person falls into these people's hands in the course of his wanderings, just like magic they [the local people] will devour the person in their soup-pots." (2014: 7).

Likewise, during the 1967-1970 civil war in Nigeria,³ in some Biafran communities practised cannibalism to survive. The Nigerian government's

³ The Nigerian Civil War also known as the Biafra War took place from 1967 to 1970. It opposed Nigeria (led by General Yakubu Gowon) to the Republic of Biafra, a break-away state that

blockade of the Igbo dominated secessionist State prevented essential supplies including food and medicine from reaching Biafran communities. This led to widespread famine and the proliferation of unusual survival strategies that included cannibalism. Speaking as an eye-witness, Bakam (2020: para 8-9), affirms that:

There was no food [...] We learnt to eat the orange and leave out only the peel. We ate avocados with the seeds inside and all kinds of things like locusts and lizards to keep us alive. The first instinct in man is that of survival. In fact, some communities ate human beings; they would go to the front and harvest the dead and eat. We were going back to the days of cannibalism because man had to survive, so everything was possible. All you wanted was to stay alive. And so, nothing was sacred.

Ritualistic cannibalism on the other hand, has survived in various cultures across the world. In tandem with this, Ben (2017) affirms that anthropophagy has been adapted to suit the spiritual framework of each culture where it is practiced. While ancient Egyptians regarded it as a ritual that guaranteed the eternal life of their pharaohs, other cultures – notably the Aghoris (a Hindu sect of ascetics in India) – have instituted cannibalism as a way to honour their beloved dead and/or acquire spiritual power. Ben (2017) writes that:

[Ritualistic] Cannibalism deals in taboo. We often think of taboo in terms of proscribed action: It's taboo to marry your brother or, in certain cultures, to eat pork. But in a much deeper sense, the word "taboo" denotes the very points where the sacred and profane converge: sexual intercourse, the taking of life, childbirth. Many cultures regard these acts as "unclean" – yet at the same time as profoundly holy. In fact, anthropologists often define taboo as an act deemed *too sacred* to perform under ordinary circumstances, an act that invites the greatest peril while invoking the most tremendous power. Cannibalism is one of the strongest taboos of all, and that might be the very reason why it's been considered one of the most holy rituals around the world and far back into the depths of prehistory.

In the context of African internecine and separatist wars, cannibalism has arguably served ritualistic purposes more than it has been part of the survival strategies of its practisers. African warriors, militias or rebel forces

declared its independence from Nigeria. During the conflict, the Republic of Biafra was headed by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. The civil war stemmed from ethnic, political and religious tensions which preceded Britain's formal decolonisation of Nigeria from 1960 to 1963.

who participate in cannibalism rituals must often believe that they draw immense spiritual and physical power from the consumption of human flesh. Their cannibalism fulfils at least three functions: first, it spiritually fortifies them; second it has propagandistic values as it strikes fears into the hearts of their enemies and third, it functions as initiation ritual through which child armies are transformed from little boys to sanctified, empowered and fortified people. According to some popular myths, ritualistic cannibalism may render a warrior invulnerable to bullets or any other weapon deployed by the enemy.

In line with the foregoing, the emergence of online videos suggesting or documenting acts of cannibalism allegedly perpetrated by Cameroonian or Nigerian separatist fighters have somewhat appeared as the continuation of an age old military culture that has been observable in West Africa. This issue will be explained in greater details in the subsequent parts of this paper. As shall be illustrated in the subsequent sections of this research, the cannibalism videos that have emerged in the context of separatist struggles in both Cameroon and Nigeria, have been subject to controversy and multiple interpretations. However, the Nigerian and Cameroonian governments have sought to weaponise the (perceived) evidence of such ritualistic cannibalism shown in the videos in different ways.

In Nigeria

In November 2021, a disturbing video showing acts of cannibalism allegedly committed by some Eastern Security Network (ESN) fighters surfaced on the Internet. The two-minute video shows some hard-to-identify young men suspected to be IPOB/ESN members celebrating over the abduction and beheading of two out of three Nigerian police officers. In the video, the young men who communicate in Igbo language are surrounded by two severed heads of police officers. The heads that appeared to have been roasted are placed by a fire, set up by the suspected ESN fighters. The two young men soon after cannibalise the deceased policemen, clowning and scorning their victims. The cannibals are heard repeatedly saying that one of the two beheaded policemen looked like a Fulani⁴ from the look of

⁴ The Fulani people constitute one of the most dominant tribes in Nigeria. They are situated in the northern part of Nigeria and are dominantly Muslim. For various socio-political reasons, Igbo separatist fighters notably the IPOB/ESN and MASSOB militants have been regarding Fulani people as a menace in south-eastern Nigeria – particularly Igbo land.

his nose. The video also shows a third policeman sitting nearby on the floor, visibly awaiting his own fate.

The release of the video on the Internet logically caused shock and disbelief in various quarters. The Nigerian government – through its Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed – swiftly seized the opportunity to negatively frame the IPOB movement and its paramilitary wing, the ESN. In his November 29, 2021 statement, Minister Lai Mohammed expressed Nigerian government’s indignation, describing IPOB/ESN’s heinous act as being unacceptable. In Lai Mohammed’s words, the killing of the two policemen was “in the most horrific and cannibalistic manner”. The minister also vowed that government will bring to justice all fighters behind the abduction, murder and cannibalisation of the two policemen.

To further paint the Igbo separatist movements as barbaric and unsympathetic, Minister Lai Mohammed underlined inconsistency between ESN fighters’ gruesome attack and calls made in different quarters for political solutions to Igbo separatist movements in Nigeria. He wondered why all the political pressure groups making such calls for political solution were reluctant or hesitating to condemn ESN fighters’ barbarism and cannibalism.

By underlining the horrific and cannibalistic dimension of ESN’s alleged crime, the Nigerian government – through Lai Mohammed’s pronouncement – mobilised the figure of the cannibal to otherise or exoticise IPOB and sensationally label it arch-criminal. The government also subtly abjectified IPOB by evoking myths and negative popular imaginations about cannibalism. As noted by Hobbs, man-eating is so steeped in taboos and stigma that, the term “cannibalism” carries series of connotation that “inherently evokes a sensationalist reading linked to the notion of violence and criminality” (2015: 272).

IPOB responded to Nigerian government’s indignation by laying both clarifications and counteraccusations. Through its Media and Publicity Secretary, Emma Powerful, the Igbo separatist movement debunked all the allegations of cannibalism stating that the incriminated abductors and cannibals were ESN fighters. In a December 2021 release, Emma Powerful claimed that:

The Leadership of the Indigenous people of Biafra wish to state unequivocally that IPOB and ESN are a disciplined freedom movement and security outfit respectively and therefore such barbarity as seen on the said video

is not, has never been and will never be part of our modus operandi. The perpetrators of such barbarism are neither IPOB nor ESN operatives. IPOB has remained a non-violent movement since inception (cited in Uneze, 2022).

Besides laundering the image of the IPOB movement and the ESN, the Media and Publicity Secretary counter-accused the Nigerian government, claiming that the latter was unscrupulously fabricating evidence to nail IPOB's leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu who at the time, was facing terrorism and treasonable charges at the Abuja High Court. Emma Powerful affirmed that:

The Nigeria security agencies namely; The Nigerian Police, The DSS, and The Nigerian Army in collaboration with some traitor governors are the ones recruiting and arming hoodlums to perpetrate atrocities across Biafra land with the single objective to implicate and demonise IPOB. They are the brains behind the violence taking place in Biafraland and they have set up armed groups across Biafraland for this single objective to portray the ESN in a bad light. We must not forget that since the international community rebuffed the Nigerian government's request to designate IPOB as a terror group, they have been looking for ways to justify their demand and this is just a part of their clandestine plans to tarnish the image of IPOB and the ESN (cited in Uneze, 2022).

Thus, IPOB deployed series of conspiracy theories to neutralise Nigerian government's propaganda against them. At first sight, this mode of defence could be read as a mere attempt to trade accusations, an approach which is not only predicable but also boring to some extent. However, deeper analysis may reveal that, by this rebuttal, IPOB subtly sought to appeal to the general public's reduced trust or lack of trust in government. According to the popular imagination in Nigeria, government officials are likely arch-demagogues and entities ready to opportunistically manipulate any given circumstances to their advantage. IPOB leveraged this popular imagination about government in their response to the Nigerian army's campaign against them.

In spite the aforementioned rebuttals, ESN's image crisis –its image as a cannibalistic entity– has remarkably persisted in the Nigerian popular imagination. This image crisis has even been exacerbated by subsequent discoveries of both fresh and decaying corpses in some of ESN military bases across Igbo land (south-eastern Nigeria). On October 1, 2023 (about two years after the abduction and murder of the two police officers mentioned above) for instance, the Nigerian army recovered some old and fresh human corpses in over four camps used by IPOB and its armed affiliate, the

ESN (People's Security Monitor, 2023; Nneoma, 2023). The recovery was done during a raid launched by the Joint Task Force South-East Operation Udo Ka II.

The raid also revealed evidence of ritualism practiced by ESN fighters. The four camps raided by the Task Force were located in Ihube, Aku and Umulolo in Okigwe local government area of Imo State. The aforementioned recovery of corpses coupled with other repulsive discoveries fuelled renewed and hard-to-quench allegations of ritualistic cannibalism practiced by ESN fighters. The Nigerian government has been using such incidences of corpse recovery to foreground the myth of ESN and IPOB as the cannibalistic other.

Some government officials have even tended to hinge on the above mentioned corpse recovery to sensationally and questionably brand the entire Igbo youth as flesh-eating people. A case in point is Femi Adesina – Media Adviser to Nigeria former President – who, in a Facebook post wondered how and why the “godly, enterprising people and vigorous dancers” of the Igbo land have spectacularly become fierce cannibals. “What then happened, that a good number of the young men [in Igbo land] are now ogres, fierce man-eating creatures, in the name of a security network? Oh, I miss the South East we used to know”, Adesina (cited in Ajimotokan & Akinwale, 2022) lamented. In retaliation to government's negative portrayals, the IPOB has repeatedly pleaded non-guilty, thereby sustaining an information war that has been ever complex and unending.

The Cameroonian Experience

On June 20, 2018, a video showing some presumed Ambazonia rebels cooking what looked like human flesh surfaced in the Cameroonian cyber space. In the video, a man – whose real name is Uche Mbatchu – is seen looking over a pot placed on wood fire. In this pot, what looks like human body parts (a head, two legs and two hands) can be seen (see Plate 2). In Pidgin English language, the apparent cook tells a nearby person that “Eat all the types of meat existing in this world. If you have never eaten this one that I am cooking, your gastronomic experience is not complete”. Other onlookers are seen at the scene of the event, standing around the pot of human body parts. One of these onlookers even helps the cook revive the fire.

Originally posted on Facebook, the video soon became viral on other social media notably Instagram and WhatsApp. The video also spectacu-

larly fuelled various anti-separatist rumours, a development that continued, even after the online footage were proven false and misleading.⁵ Many anti-separatist opinion moulders and observers uncritically hinged on the video to associate Anglophone separatist fighters in Cameroon's North-west and South-west regions with cannibalism and barbarity.



Plate 2. Cannibalism Video on Facebook.

While (re)posting or commenting on the video, these observers mainly claimed that the men seen in the footage are cannibals and that the strange images were taken in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. Without verification, some Government officials likewise relayed the unfounded rumours in a hasty way, thereby participating in a disinformation campaign. In spite of its inadvertent nature, this disinformation campaign remained favourable only to government anti-separatist efforts.

In tandem with the foregoing, Cameroon Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, Atanga Nji, used various televised programs

⁵ Local websites and foreign observers found the cannibalism video false. In reality, the video was the work of Nigerian make-up artist, Hakeem Onilogbo. The latter even appears in the video. In an interview later granted to some international media, Onilogbo and Uche Mbatchesu (another person seen in the video, clarified that the contents of the pot seen in the video are not human parts but mere object made of plastic. In spite of the clarification provided by the both Onilogbo and Mbatchesu (seen in the video), some internet users misread the video and presented it as a cannibalism scene.

on government owned CRTV, to evoke the contents of the misleading video and to demonise all the armed separatist movements operating in Anglo-phone Cameroon. Like in the Nigerian experience explored earlier in this paper, the government –through Mr. Atanga Nji’s pronouncements– sought to present the separatist fighters as the cannibal Other, who is even worse than other categories of barbaric entities. In the June 25, 2018 edition of CRTV’s program titled “Inside Presidency” for instance, the minister said the separatists were worse than dreaded terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram. In his words, “Boko Haram committed atrocities, but they did not cut up humans and cook them in pots” (cited in McAllister, 2018).

Although the notion of cannibalism was later debunked by local websites and foreign observers, the minister’s propaganda raised the question of the many atrocities committed by separatist movements in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions. Additionally, the minister’s propaganda drew audiences’ attention to some gloomy stereotypes about the separatist movements. Some of these stereotypes associate separatist movement with ritualism and voodoo. This will be explored in greater details in the subsequent parts of the paper.

Factors that May Spur Masses into Believing the Cannibalism Videos

The cannibalism videos that seasonally fuel information wars between government and separatist movements in Cameroon and Nigeria have always been subject to serious controversy. These videos have most often engendered accusations and counteraccusations from government and the separatist movements. Never has a separatist movement assumed responsibility for acts of cannibalism allegedly committed by them or shown in these online videos. Rather, the tendency among these Cameroonian and Nigerian separatist movements has been to woefully reject or debunk allegations of cannibalism even when fact-checkers successfully authenticate the repulsive videos or, even when empirical evidence plead in disfavour of the separatists’ rebuttals. This separatists’ tendency of rejecting damning allegations of cannibalism and trading counteraccusations against government could be attributed to at least two factors. First, it could logically be premised on separatist movements’ efforts at protecting their integrity. Second, separatist movements’ rejection may at first sight suggest that no emerging online cannibalism video should be taken as gospel truth or at face value.

However, the controversy mentioned above has hardly neutralised the gullibility of Cameroonian and Nigerian masses. In other words, Cameroonian and Nigerian social media users have tended to give a relative amount of credibility to videos or rumours representing separatist movements as adepts of ritualistic cannibalism. One just needs to consider the buzz and the nature of commentaries these cannibalism video usually elicit on social media platforms. In Nigeria for instance, the emergence of disturbing cannibalism footage has in most cases triggered a social and online discourse that foregrounds the myth of the cannibal warrior among other legends. Online gossip fora such as *Nairaland Forum* (2021) and *Gistmania* (2021) for instance, bear clear evidence of Nigerian audiences' tendency to uncritically believe claims made by online videos that represent IPOB fighters as cannibals. Cameroonian and Nigerian audiences' gullibility may be attributed to a number of social factors, three of which include: a) West African popular imaginations about war-induced cannibalism, b) Cameroonian and Nigerian audiences' fetish mindsets and c) weaknesses in separatists' defence.

West African Popular Imagination about War-Induced Cannibalism

The proliferation of the age old myth of war-induced cannibalism may spur Cameroonian and Nigerian audiences into easily believing allegations of cannibalistic practices committed by separatist movements. In effect, the history of armed rebellions and insurgencies in West Africa in particular and sub-Saharan Africa in general is characterised by recurrent incidents of cannibalistic tendencies perpetrated by rebel movements and militias (Wroe, 2018). These tendencies have over the years popularised and naturalised the myth stipulating that ritualistic cannibalism is enshrined in militias' and insurgent forces' war tactics. In effect, 1990s and early 2000s conflicts such as the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone have witnessed the recrudescence of cannibalism among rebel movements. International NGOs monitoring these civil wars regularly published reports that documented cannibalistic feasts among rebel forces (Thomas, 2017). In 2020, for instance many Liberian "big men" (rebel fighters) appeared before the International War Crime Tribunal in Bellizona (Switzerland) to answer accusations of cannibalism among other charges (The Guardian, 2020).

The fact that cannibalism is not uncommon in West African conflicts makes conditions favourable for Cameroonian and Nigerian audiences' gullibility. In other words, the recrudescence of anthropophagy engenders a situation where audiences likely see allegations of flesh-eating by sepa-

ratist forces as a possibility, nay a must in the war. The Nigerian and Cameroonian governments have, in some instances, even capitalised on the aforementioned enabling factor to formulate their anti-separatist messages. For instance, in 2023, the Nigerian army raided four Okigwe-based camps of the ESN and recovered some old and fresh corpses among other things. And while informing the general public of the outcome of their raid, the army endeavoured to emphasize the ritualistic and odd use of these corpses in ESN's *modus operandis*. It said: "It was discovered that the camps were being used to perpetrate atrocities such as cannibalism, occult practices, and ritual killings to instil fears into the law-abiding citizens. These were evident from many fresh and old corpses discovered while clearing the entire camps" (cited in People's Security Monitor, 2024).

Besides tapping into the West African myth of the cannibal warlord, the Nigerian government statement mentioned above hinges on a number of arguable stereotypes that depict the Igbo people in particular as flesh-eating people. In effect, myths suggesting the proliferation of cannibalism among the Igbo people have over the years been so popular that they have caught the attention of some Igbo scholars, politicians and social critics. The latter who have in various ways sought either to debunk or understand these myths. In an article titled "Here be Cannibals" Ochigbo (2018) treats the case of the Arochukwu people – an Igbo village – which up till modern days are wrongly believed to be cannibals. While querying contemporary stereotypes that depict these Igbo people as human flesh eaters, Ochigbo (2018) affirms that "[cannibalism] was a very real concern in tribal days, especially given that there is some evidence that, back then, the Arochukwu people did consume human flesh that had been sacrificed to their god". Similarly, Jones (2014: 7) argues that "ritual cannibalism is thought to have existed in earlier years among [...] the leopard societies of West Africa", among which features Igbo land. This belief in Igbo people cannibalism has survived over the years. As shown in Femi Adesina's 2022 statement on the IPOB/ESN secessionist activities in Igbo land (earlier cited in this paper), many Nigerian politicians and opinion molders have tended to tapped into this cannibalism myths to lambast Igbo separatists.

Cameroonian politicians – notably Atanga Nji (earlier cited in this paper) – have similarly mobilised rumours which suggest that Anglophone separatist movements in Cameroon practice (ritual) cannibalism and are as barbaric as terrorist movements. These rumours are concordant to the myth suggesting that rebel movements in West Africa tend to practice ritu-

alistic or transference cannibalism. Such a concordance may spur Cameroonian masses into giving some modicum of credence to the rumours spread by Cameroonian government. It should however be underlined that in spite of the concordance mentioned above, man-eating culture in many Anglophone Cameroon tribes has since pre-colonial period been more a myth than a reality. Using some Anglophone tribes situated in the Bamenda grassfield of Cameroon as case study, Nyamjoh (2018) and Nkwi (2018) argue that stereotypes suggesting that cannibalism ever existed among Anglophone Cameroon people are mainly the coloniser's creation. These stereotypes were mainly and systemically fuelled by Western missionaries' writings on tribal Anglophone Cameroonians. Nkwi in particular describes this colonial tendency of associating Anglophone people with cannibalism as the outcome of "the 'colonial library' of contested knowledge" which was "created by the colonizer, the European anthropologist and Western missionary to define and redefine, recreate and reformulate Africa; invent and re-invent Africans and African ways of life in the image of the West and according to their whims and caprices." (2018: 159).

Cameroonian and Nigerian Audiences' Fetish Mindset

In the Nigerian and Cameroonian popular imagination, phenomena such as armed rebellions, terrorist agitations and armed robbery are associated with gloomy practices related or similar to cannibalism, notably sorcery, voodoo and black magic. It is not uncommon in Cameroon and Nigeria to come across stories/legends of hardened criminals, warlords or rebellion leaders who principally relied on black magic and paranormal tactics to attain their illicit or violent goals (Arrey-Mbi, 2020; Abdullahi, 2023; Ojo, 2024). The aforementioned popular imaginary in itself makes conditions favourable for Cameroonian and Nigerian masses' gullibility in the event of allegations of ritualistic cannibalism committed by separatist forces.

From the early stages of the Ambazonian war in Cameroon, Anglophone separatist fighters were regularly embroiled in issues of fetishism and ritualism. These fighters were also popularly associated with paranormal military tactics that are reminiscent of human sacrifices and cannibalism. It was for instance constantly rumoured that most Ambazonian fighters use "Odeshi" (local name for fetishes and talismans) that provided them spiritual and physical fortification and protection against opponents' bullets (Arrey-Mbi 2020). Many raids conducted on Cameroon Anglophone separatist camps revealed that the secessionists rely on such occult approaches as shrines and black magic as supplement/complement to their

military tactics. Similar revelations have followed Nigeria army's raids of IPOB/ESN camps in south-eastern Nigeria (Abdullahi, 2023; Ajimotokan & Akinwale, 2022). This popular tendency of associating separatist forces with black magic makes conditions favourable for Cameroonian and Nigerian audiences to likely believe allegations of ritual cannibalism committed by separatist fighters. In tandem with this, even if a cannibalism video is proven to be false, rumours and myths may still make the populace view war-induced cannibalism as a possibility. Conscious of this, the Nigerian army's propaganda has, in given opportunities, not hesitated to make subtle parallel between IPOB/ENS's involvement in black magic and their practice of cannibalism. When it raided about four camps used as bases by IPOB in 2023 the Nigerian Army alleged that: the camps boasted of shrines and altars where ENS fighters offered human sacrifices and performed rituals – including cannibalism to gain fortification for their war (The People's Security Monitor, 2024).

Weaknesses in Separatist Movements' Defence

The last but not least factor susceptible to trigger masses' gullibility in the event of cannibalism allegations against separatists is the presence of inconsistencies in secessionist movements' rebuttals. In effect when denying allegations made against them, separatist movements sometimes contradict themselves thereby eroding their credibility. When in 2021, the Nigerian government accused IPOB and ESN of abducting, killing and cannibalising some Nigerian policemen, IPOB Media and Publicity Officer, Emma Powerful, replied with a message punctuated by a number of contradictions. The group asserted that:

It is clear to all and sundry that IPOB and ESN have never engaged in any of the senseless killings going on in our land. ESN's mandate is to resist terrorists and jihadists invading our ancestral land and destroying our crops and raping our sisters and mothers. IPOB members are not killers but freedom fighters struggling for the peaceful restoration of the Independent state of Biafra (cited in Uneze, 2022).

In the above mentioned extract, IPOB simultaneously claims not be involved in killings and to have limited the mandate of its ESN to mere militarily resistance to non-Igbo identities – particularly Fulanis whom It calls "jihadists" in their message. This segment of IPOB message is subtly contradictory given that it paradoxically suggests that the two policemen victims of cannibalism are from the ethnic group they (ESN) are resisting in Igbo land.

Conclusion

The information war opposing government and separatist movements in Cameroon and Nigeria has, at various points in time, involved the use of gloomy videos that suggest that secessionist forces practice ritual cannibalism as part of their spirituality and war tactics. Mainly shared on the social media, these cannibalism videos have often engendered separatist movements' image crises. This paper has attained two principal objectives. Firstly, it examined how the Cameroonian and Nigerian governments have been weaponsising the aforementioned gloomy videos to diversify their anti-separatist propaganda and justify their military campaigns against separatism on their respective territories. The paper also examined how secessionist movements have often responded to the aforementioned damning video-assisted propaganda. The paper argued that by weaponising video-induced allegations of ritualistic cannibalism, government visual propaganda has, in most instances, revolved around demonising and abjectifying separatist movements. It (government) has in the process sought to foreground and mobilise popular myths that represent separatist movements as the cannibal Other. In response, separatist movements have mainly tended to appeal on masses' reduced confidence or lack of trust in government officials, by evoking various conspiracy theories.

Secondly, the paper explored three factors that make Cameroonian and Nigerian masses likely to believe allegations of ritualistic cannibalism committed by separatist forces. These factors include West African peoples' popular imaginations about war-induced cannibalism, Nigerian and Cameroonian masses' fetish mindset and inconsistencies in separatist movements' rebuttals concerning accusations of cannibalistic tendencies. The two first factors are susceptible to spur masses into viewing ritual cannibalism as a possible component of separatist forces' modus operandi while the last factor may affect the credibility of separatist counter propaganda. The three factors mentioned above are susceptible to motivate masses into associating armed rebellions and separatist fighters with practices related to, or reminiscent of ritualistic cannibalism. Thus, even when a video is fact-checked and proven false, the aforementioned factors are susceptible to motivate masses into regarding cannibalism as a possible element of separatist groups' spiritual-military tactics. This paper focused on the place of cannibalism videos in the online information war opposing government and separatist movements in Nigeria and Cameroon. Subse-

quent research may focus on how issues such as artificial intelligence have exacerbated this information war and how website and fact-checkers have come to terms with this new development.

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