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**THE STAIN OF BLOOD**

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In the Musey language of western Chad it is called *tògòrò*, in Sara-Madjingai of southeastern Chad it is known as *mōsēyō*, in Gbaya as spoken in central Cameroon and in the Central African Republic it is called *simbò*. In the Pidgin English spoken along the West African coast it is referred to as *bad law* [*bad luck*]. Strangely, perhaps, standard English does not have an equivalent word, at least not in contemporary speech. The closest functional equivalent may be the English reference to “the stain of blood” or the expression “to have blood on one’s hands.”

These various words and expressions all express the result of shedding blood. A person who is guilty of shedding blood becomes the victim of his/her deed. The consequence of the act of killing will inevitably fall upon the killer and potentially upon anyone who comes in contact with the killer, unless the killer is purified.

In Gbaya a *simbò thing* is anything that causes someone to become a *simbò person*. The Gbaya traditionally hunted the game of central Africa with their spears, later with bows and arrows, and more recently, with firearms. Some of the animals that they hunted were *simbò animals*, for example, the leopard and the eland and the bongo. The leopard is, of course, a feared hunter in its own right, and the eland and the bongo are the greatest of the savanna and forest antelope respectively.

Meat was needed for the survival of the community and bravery was an honored virtue, but a hunter who killed any of these animals brought “the stain of death” upon himself. These animals were not taboo animals, for each clan had its own taboo. They were wild game, but they were animals that represented something more profound than merely being the potential prey of hunters. Their blood could not be shed with impunity.

Greater even than these animals was the human being. Whether through battle or through accident, the spilling of human blood brought the curse of *simbò* upon the person who was responsible for the death of a fellow human being. From this curse there was no escape for the guilty person and his family and his village without purification by another person who himself had been purified from *simbò*. Without the “cooling” effect of the leaf of a certain small savanna tree and the washing of water in the rite of *bathing simbò*, suffering the fate of *simbò* was inevitable (Christensen 1990, 54-55, 142-144).

For the translator of the Bible the question that must be asked is whether the concept associated with the spilling of blood by these central African cultures is similar to the concepts reflected in the Old and New Testaments or whether it is too culture-specific to be applied within the context of Hebrew and Jewish religious thought and expression.

When Pilate washes his hands before the people and says, “I am not responsible for this man’s death,” and the mob responds, “Let the punishment for his death fall on us and on our children” (Mt 27.24, 25 TEV), the Gbaya understand this to refer to *simbò*. Pilate attempts to cleanse himself from the consequence of his responsibility in the death of Jesus while the people call for that very consequence

to fall upon themselves. In the Gbaya understanding of the shedding of blood, no amount of self-cleansing can remove the curse of spilled blood which will surely fall upon Pilate and the people and their descendants.

In Acts 5.28 the Jews express an implied fear of *simbò* when the High Priest says to the apostles, “you want to make us responsible for this man’s death” (TEV). The New International Version of the Bible renders this statement, “you are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” The Gbaya would say, “you want this man’s *simbò* to take us.”

The Greek text of these verses reflects the Hebrew underlying thought, for in each of the three sentences quoted, explicit reference is made to blood (cf Bratcher 1971.104-105):

“*guiltless/innocent I am of the blood of this one*” (Mt 27.24)

“*[may] the blood of him [fall] upon us and upon children of us*”  
(Mt 27.25)

“*you intend/desire to bring upon us the blood of man this*” (Acts 5.28)

The significance of the shedding of blood is seen very early in the Old Testament. When Cain murders his brother, it is the spilled blood that calls out from the earth for vengeance (Gen 4.10). In Num 35.33-34 there is a warning against defiling the land: “Murder defiles the land, ... Do not defile the land where you are living, because I am the LORD and I live among the people of Israel” (TEV). In the Hebrew text of these verses, it is not “murder” that defiles and pollutes the land but *dam*, “blood”.

An Old Testament condemnation formula refers to blood on one’s own head or on the head of someone else (see Josh 2.19; Ezek 33.2-6). *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* affirms that shed blood was widely believed to have “uncanny power” (Suppl. 11) and it devotes nearly a full page to a discussion of “blood guilt” which it defines as “Guilt—not always liable to a legal penalty—incurred through bloodshed” (vol 1, 449). With specific reference to the spilling of innocent blood, bloodguilt was said to defile the individual, the community and the land. Its consequences could be lasting, for King David was not permitted to build the Temple.

However, among the Hebrews, bloodguilt was not associated exclusively with the spilling of human blood. Defilement could also fall upon someone who sacrificed an animal elsewhere than at a prescribed location (see Lev 17.4).

Although there does not seem to be a specific word that expresses the concept of *simbò* in Hebrew, in Greek we do come very close to an explicit expression of the result of the shedding of blood. *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* cites the Greek word *miasma* which it defines as the “stain, pollution” of homicide, “an automatic, objective state” for which purification was required (vol 1, 449). The early Greek verb *miainō* meant “to stain, to dye.” A specialized meaning of this verb resulted from its use with blood where it came to mean “to defile, to sully.” The stain or defilement was known as *miasma*, the person who was defiled was *miaros* (Liddell and Scott 1961, 512; see also Jer 2.22). For the Gbaya this was *simbò*, for the Sar speaker it was *mōsēyō* which is literally, “the blood of death,” that is, “the stain/defilement of the spilling of human blood” (Ngarbolnan 1990, 51-52).

An extended use of the Greek verb is found in the writings of the Greek tragedians where it came to refer to moral defilement. This is its meaning as used in the New Testament. Peter writes of "the pollutions of the world" (2 Pet 2.20) and the writer to the Hebrews speaks of being defiled by sin (Heb 12.15). This extended meaning is not referred to in Gbaya by *simbò* but by another ritual expression, "to spoil the way of oneself," a defilement that also required purification even though it was not associated with bloodshed.

*Simbò* does however extend beyond the spilling of blood. The initiation rite through which Gbaya boys became men was also a *simbò thing*. The initiation was powerful and dangerous; in it young men died and came to life again to take their place as adults in the Gbaya community. Before they could re-enter society, they were purified of the ritual death they had undergone. Leprosy likewise was viewed as a *simbò thing* and lepers were *simbò people* who were a source of potential contamination for the community. If they were healed, they were required to undergo ritual bathing to cleanse them of the defilement of their disease (Christensen 1990, 105-106).

In the Old Testament God's presence in the Burning Bush and at Mount Sinai made them *simbò places*. The Ark of the Covenant was a *simbò thing*, for otherwise Uzziah would not have died when he touched it. When the Roman soldiers cast lots for Jesus' tunic, they were tempting *simbò*. Ananias and Sapphira were victims of *simbò* for they violated the inviolable and they died as a result of their deed.

*Simbò* represents two dualities of Gbaya tradition, namely, blessing-curse and pure-impure. It is a curse because from the taking of life it brings death and misfortune; it is defilement because from the violation of life it brings contamination upon the land and the people who live in it.

These dualities are also found in biblical thought. In the book of Genesis the blessing is the gift and the maintenance of life, the curse is the removal of life. Purity and impurity is a related and dominant theme of the Old Testament. God is holy and pure and he demands that the people among whom he dwells and the place in which he dwells should be pure. The spilling of blood is a curse that defiles and renders impure.

In conclusion, the components that are central to the Old Testament concept of *dam/damim* and the New Testament *miasma* are widely recognized in the cultures of central Africa. The implications of this fact need to be considered by translator and theologian alike.

### Bibliography

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