

## Blood, Silver, and Coffee

### *The Material Histories of Sanctity and Slavery*

The Zege coffee forest is locally understood as material testimony of the work of the monasteries on the peninsula and of the covenant with which they were founded. Church forests have recently become an object of research interest in conservation research, as part of a wider recognition of the environmental importance of sacred groves in Ethiopia and throughout Africa (Tsehai 2008, Klepeis et al. 2016, Orlowska 2015). But the forest also has a complex and painful labor history associated with the legacy of slavery (Abdussamad 1997, Tihut 2009). Indeed, there are intimate connections between this history of slavery and the official history of the sacred forest, and these linkages are quite fresh in local memory.

It is the two narratives of sanctity and slavery that I want to try to pick apart in this chapter, and in particular how people are able to read these memories from the material landscape. While I have found that Orthodox Christians in Zege present the public history of sanctity in terms of the landscape of the forest and churches, the more troublesome history of labor and production is equally present and tangible in the living, material environment, especially in the coffee trees. Coffee possesses a problematic double quality as both a local medium of hospitality and a long-distance trade commodity. The difference between mediating hospitality relations and mediating trade has tremendous moral and practical significance that helps us understand the dual quality of Zege's history and the way that this dual history is present in the immediate material environment.

This is a discussion of historicity rather than history: not an attempt to construct a narrative of what happened from the sources available (though I do my best), but an investigation into how people in a certain locale live through and understand their existence in time, how they carry the past into the present and

future (Lambek 2002, Hirsch & Stewart 2005). This temporal engagement can be with material things that endure through time, like silver coins, or with regulated and organized forms of action, like the ritual cycle. Usually it is a combination of both. People in Zege tend to describe their connections with the past through their churches and monasteries and through the coffee forest, both of which have stood for a long time, but only with continuous human tenure and maintenance. In addition to maintaining their surroundings, Zegeña are able to perceive or infer, in their churches and coffee trees, condensed chains of action and interaction that led to their being here in the present (Ingold 2000). A large part of this history is borne in the environment, and in the ongoing interaction between people, churches, and trees.

#### RICH MAN, SLAVE, AND SAINT

Official local history traces the presence of the church-monasteries and of the forest alike to a foundational covenant (*kidan*) between God and the holy man *Abune Betre Maryam*, whose name means “The Staff of Mary.” This history is recorded in the book of the Acts of Betre Maryam, who lived during the reign of Emperor Amde Sion (r. 1314–44; Cerulli 1946, Bosc-Tiessé 2008). The book is kept in the monastery of Mehal Zege Giyorgis and dates from around 1685 (Derat 2003: 507), but versions of the story are known to most inhabitants of the peninsula. It states that Betre Maryam had been commanded by God to leave farm life in his homeland and become a monk. After various travels he was commanded by God to travel to Zege, whereupon his staff miraculously transported him across Lake Tana, like a boat. There he received a vision in which Gabriel (some accounts say Saint George) told him that God wished him to build a church. With the emperor’s blessing he did so, and a monastic community began to gather. Some were local residents who had been miraculously healed by Betre Maryam.

As the community grew, so did the need for sustenance. Betre Maryam divided his staff into three pieces, which he planted into the ground. These grew into hops, coffee, and buckthorn (*ades*), which would support the people.<sup>1</sup> God promised Betre Maryam that those who lived on the peninsula would be saved, and that it would be holy like Jerusalem. They would also be protected from wild animal attacks and natural disasters. But in return, all farming must be done by hand, with no extra tools; and no plough animals were to be kept anywhere on the peninsula. More or less everyone in Zege knows a version of this story, which is commemorated in paintings on the walls of several of the peninsula’s churches.

I would later learn a second story, almost as widely known, often repeated, but far less public. It goes like this: The time of Zege’s greatest wealth was roughly a hundred years ago, from the time of Emperor Menilek (r. 1889–1913) until the early twentieth century, when many landholder-merchants grew rich from the coffee

trade. When a trader got rich, he would need a place to hide his silver thalers, since there were no banks. He would bury the silver in an interior room of his house, and would have a sorcerer (*t'enqway*) place a curse on it by promising it to a demon, so that anyone who took the silver out would die. But when the merchant himself wanted to retrieve his money, he would sacrifice a slave and let their blood fall on the burial place. Then the debt would be paid off and the merchant could take his money.

When people tell this story (which I have cross-checked several times), some are skeptical, while others are absolutely insistent that this took place as reported. I think its frisson, along with the reason for its popularity, apart from the sheer horror, is the moral reversal taking place—or perhaps a moral revelation. Coffee merchants were landowners, usually noble, frequently closely connected to the church (see chapter 1), and some of the most respected and highest-status people on the peninsula. Slaves are and were despised, and bear a shame and stigma that carry on to their descendants today. It is a comment on the dramatic obscenity of power, but one shot through with ambivalence. Showing high-status people doing unconscionable things to low-status people brings out the uncomfortable conjunction of the supposed impurity of slaves with the inescapable recognition of their common humanity—especially given the shared Christianity of master and slave.

The word people have used for killing a slave, when telling me the story, was *mared*, which usually means to slaughter an animal. The slaughter of the slave is an inversion of a positive model of sacrifice, which might be epitomized by the slaughter of a sheep on a person's grave forty days after they die to remember them and assist in the expiation of their sins. At the center of the tale is the absurdity of trading silver for blood, and hence of trying to square market exchange (establishing values of things against one another) with sacrificial transactions (arranging moral relationships among people and God). But behind the blood and the silver lies coffee, the basis of Zege's economy, which is understood as both a commodity and a gift from God.

My argument is not exactly that the first story—of the holiness of the place and the conservation of coffee for the population—is ideology, and the second story counterideology. It is more that people in Zege are well aware of both histories—after all, I got these stories from them—and recognize both stories as their own. Let me start with the sacred story. The forest has significance because Amhara people have paradigmatically been associated with Orthodox Christianity and plough agriculture (Levine 1965, McCann 1995). Cattle and ploughing have been and remain central not only to productive life but to Orthodox Christians' self-understandings and conceptions of civilization, by contrast to the normative roles of Muslims as traders and pagans as artisans. Endless proverbs attest to the deep connection between a man, his lands, and his oxen. This is why it matters that all cattle and ploughing are forbidden throughout the Zege peninsula by church

edict. The cattle ban, which Zege people regard as the basis of their distinctiveness, sets them apart from the vast majority of Christians in highland Amhara. Instead, people live on the cultivation of coffee and petty cash crops—hops, chillies, fruit—along with some smallholding and, nowadays, the tourists who come to visit the monasteries and walk in the forest.

There is a widespread tradition in Ethiopia of not clearing the land around churches. Churches are refuges (*deber*, Kane 1990: 1779), and are supposed to exist at a remove from the worldliness of human productive and reproductive work. Ploughing is the curse of Adam, and churches, by some accounts, are supposed to resemble the Garden of Eden. In Zege this trope of the sacred forest has been applied to the entire inhabited peninsula, which locals refer to as *yegedam ager*, “land of monasteries.” The centerpiece of the story is this: we have coffee because we are blessed by the covenant of Betre Maryam. Coffee is less labor-intensive than ploughing, and so fits very well into discourses about how to be free from labor is holy. Inhabitants of Zege often take pride in being “forest people” (*yeden sewochh*) and not “peasants” (*geferé*, Tihut 2009: 48–49)

However, based on regional history, the fourteenth century is far too early for coffee to be present in this part of Ethiopia (Merid 1988).<sup>2</sup> There are hagiographies written in the seventeenth century that Enrico Cerulli (1946) has discussed in which the story of Betre Maryam has the form that people now tell, except that, instead of coffee, the monk is given hops, buckthorn, and fruit by God. Later additions to the text, in Amharic rather than classical Ge'ez, say that the fruit was the fruit of the coffee tree.

It is possible that this is a sincere piece of interpretive work—such annotation of texts was standard practice. The writer may not have been aware that there had not always been coffee. But it is also possible that this was a cynical interpolation by somebody looking to justify large-scale coffee cultivation on church land. In any case, we can deduce that Zege was considered special because of its lack of plough agriculture before the seventeenth century, but that only later did coffee come to the area and get incorporated into the story. There are at least a few people on the peninsula who share this opinion.

What is not in doubt, however, is that the monasteries are important in making sure there is still a coffee forest in Zege, which is a fact of great economic significance. It is the monasteries, and the local administrative hierarchies associated with them, that have enforced the ploughing ban and preserved the forest. Zege people are currently very sensitive to the threat that short-term exigencies can pose to the forest; in the last decade many people have been pressured into cutting the forest for firewood or even some ploughing to address their immediate hardships. There has been some deforestation in Zege largely because of the number of people struggling with their basic subsistence (Rahel 2002, Tihut 2009). In this context people describe the church regulation of the forest as an important

guarantor of Zege's future—although Tihut (2009: 6, 15) presents a strong case that the sacred forest narrative has impeded attempts at diversification that might improve livelihoods.

The story of Zege's historic depth is understood as a story of belonging, of holiness, and at least sometimes of prosperity. These days, it is exactly the historic qualities of the churches that draw in tourists and with them vital contributions to Zege's income. In this version of the story, deep religious continuity and economic and environmental life are thoroughly integrated. It is a good story for tourists, and when I was first there in 2008, the abbot was pushing this history quite strongly—he visited me personally to make sure I had the English copy of the pamphlet that explained it.

Material history piles up in churches and monasteries. The inner walls are decorated with murals depicting biblical events and stories from the Ethiopic canon; main themes include angelic protection and the violent deaths of saints. Sometimes they incorporate local dignitaries who have made donations to the church, sometimes local founding events, such as portraits of Betre Maryam in the churches of Mehal Zege. The murals are palimpsests of history from different eras, and are one of the principal attractions that draw tourists to the area, both for their beauty and for the venerability that they index. Around the murals are the gifts that have accrued in the church: the crowns and shields, military regalia, hanging portraits, and royal robes gifted by various dignitaries and fellow churches. Pride of place goes to parchment books, hand-illuminated and claimed to be over a millennium old.

Recent years have seen efforts to build more formal museums and bring these piles of memorabilia into a more formal display. Each amassed item testifies to the consistent attractive power of the monasteries, the gravity they have accumulated in a sort of continuing feedback loop that marks these places as “historic” for foreigners and as pilgrimage spots for Orthodox Christians. The feedback loop that starts from blessing and becomes increasingly layered in material things shows how the monasteries exert a force of their own, having gained an inertia that impels their continuing maintenance (Hodder 2012). As far as Zege's official story goes, this inertia of the monasteries is also the inertia of the coffee forest, which is one more material accrual signifying the blessed status of the land.

Being a holy land has certain benefits, which is another point that local histories emphasize. Bosc-Tiessé (2008) has shown how the monasteries in Zege were very skilled at portraying local leaders praying to the Virgin or to saints in a way that both flattered them and subtly reminded them that they were subject to higher powers. The role of the monasteries in sheltering the population from political power has been quite prominent in local memory; as sacred places they were not just inviolate, but able to project some of that protection to their parishes. Church protection of the forest is presented as continuous with this tradition: the

monasteries protect the coffee from short-term factors that would threaten the environment, as a counterbalance to the government-run system of land tenure and the exigencies of the market.

There are multiple stories in which kings and emperors release the people of the peninsula from their tax duties because they wish to receive blessing or healing from the monasteries—the pamphlet mentions Emperor Iyasu the great (r. 1682–1706), and local historians tell me that Emperor Menilek also freed the people from taxes for a period.<sup>3</sup> According to Binayew Tamrat (2014: 21), during the two centuries from Iyasu to Menilek, taxation in Zege was due only to the church, hence the saying *be Zege yellem gibbir, be semay yellem dur* (There are no taxes in Zege, as there is no forest in heaven).<sup>4</sup> In Zege's public memory, the presence of coffee is integral to this story of holy protection.

### THE PROBLEM WITH COFFEE

We have established that coffee was not a part of the original founding story of the monasteries. It seems likely that the early monastic communities, and later the lay communities that settled around them, supported themselves by growing hops, buckthorn, and fruit, which was traded with the surrounding population. The mango trade across Lake Tana is still quite important in the area. At some point, probably in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, coffee gets introduced to Zege and starts to become much more important than the other trades (Cheesman 1936, Pankhurst 1968).

This is important because coffee and hops have slightly different ranges of value. Coffee is now an archetypal medium of hospitality for Christians in Ethiopia, and the coffee ceremony has become part of how the country is presented and presents itself abroad. But until the nineteenth century Christians considered coffee a Muslim product and did not partake in it at all (Pankhurst 1997). Hops, however, were always a good hospitality product for Christians because *t'ella*, homebrewed beer, is so well established as a good thing to serve to guests, and because Muslims do not drink it. Coffee, hops, and perfumed leaves are all aromatic substances, which is a part of their use in hospitality—in creating a certain kind of convivial space and a sensory atmosphere that hosts and guests can share in. Nowadays beer and coffee are both good for hospitality in Zege and so there is a small local market in both. But what coffee has that hops do not is long-range commodity value, and this introduces a whole new turbulence to affairs in Zege—and yet, despite this, coffee has fit straight into the foundation narrative of the monasteries so that it is as if it were always there.

Centralization and expansion of the coffee trade in Zege appear to have been most pronounced in the time of King Tekle Haymanot of Gojjam and his son Ras Haylu, who were the local rulers from 1880 until the 1920s or so. In this period,

marked by the substantial independence of regional warlords, there was an explosion in the coffee trade throughout Ethiopia, brought about by the presence of British and Italian markets in the area and the birth of Addis Ababa (Crummey 2000: 230).

According to local memory, this was also a time of a sharp increase in the slave trade in the peninsula. Both Tekle Haymanot and Ras Haylu were showing increasing interest in lands to the west as sources of both gold and slaves (Triulzi 1981: 136, Cheesman 1936: 185). Muslim and Agew traders would bring people from what is now South Sudan and the Benishangul Gumuz region of Ethiopia, as Abdussamad (1997, 1999) has documented, and sell them in the local market town. Abdussamad is quite clear that Orthodox priests were major slave owners in this period, though there is cause to wonder whether some of these were in fact parachurch figures such as the *yager líqered* and the *mislené* (see chapter 1). These men may or may not have been drawn from the clergy, but always had relations to the church through education or financial or other kinds of service.

From local testimony and what we know about the slave trade in this region, it seems that many slaves were domestics as much as field laborers (FERNYHOUGH 2010: 68). While slave labor was certainly important for the watering and harvesting of coffee, it seems that slaves were also status symbols and house servants for those who grew rich from the coffee trade. These are the people referred to in the story of the rich man, the silver, and the slave. It is remembered now as a period when the peninsula was much wealthier than it is today, but when both land and wealth were concentrated in few hands.

#### LEGACIES AND DESCENDANTS

The high period of slavery appears to have been a time when distinctions between “proper” (*chèwa*) people and others became more deeply essentialized and propriety come to be seen as a hereditary condition of the body, through metaphors of bone (*at’int*) or blood (*dem*). In many of the interviews I have conducted, the concepts of slaves (*bariya*) and *mislené* stand for broader categories of clean and unclean. Slave descent carries a hereditary impurity that remains extremely relevant in Zege today. It is described in terms of “seeds” (*zer*); just as coffee seeds make coffee, *yebariya zer*, “the seed of slaves,” makes slaves, and *yemislené zer* makes “proper” people. Abdussamad (1997: 549) reports that priests would often bequeath all their worldly property to their slaves on their deathbeds, but this did not transform them into true free people.

Amhara society, as Allan Hoben’s classic study (1973) describes, is cognatic—you can trace descent and land claims through your father or your mother, so there are no great family lineages like those found in other parts of Africa. Instead you get a cloud of relatedness and competing land claims—something that the chronicler of Gojjam, Aläqa Täkle Iyäsus, laments: “That it is a disadvantage not

to know how to enumerate ancestral descent has not been learnt yet in Ethiopia” (Täklä Iyäsus 2014: 30).

However, it is also the case that people keep quite careful private genealogical records. Local scholars know the names of the fathers of most people back several generations. Now one reason for this is to prevent incest according to the seventh-generation rule, but a much more important one is to know who is descended from slaves. Indeed, the identity of slave descendants is a public secret. It is not discussed openly, but *chewa* people, especially of older generations, are careful not to eat with slave descendants and especially not to let their children intermarry.

What is visible on the day-to-day level is a certain amount of uncomfortable joking about boys and girls with dark skin. This exists in a context where Amhara people are generally thought to have lighter skin than people from elsewhere in Africa, especially areas from which slaves were taken. The group of teenagers I play football with refer to one of their friends as “Babbi Bariyew”—Baby Slave. This was the sort of joke that actually carries a serious and wounding insult. It does not stop the boys from being friends, but it serves as a permanent reminder of an underlying difference that would become much clearer if questions of marriage or even romance ever came up. The last time I returned to Zege, this young man had left the area after an argument (see next chapter). Such disruptions appear to be quite common in the lives of slave descendants.

Abdussamad (1997: 547) reports that escaped or freed slaves from other areas would actually move to Zege to work as dependents there, because the situation was better, in part because of the coffee boom. So we have to understand the formation of this class of people—both slaves held by landlords in Zege and their descendants, but also slaves from other areas, and various other kinds of landless people, including the *Falasha*, or Beta Israel, of whom there were some in this area. Various different stigmatized people came to be identified in the same class, and could often intermarry, forming quasi-ethnicized and racialized class-caste groups. Today most of these people are Orthodox Christians and attend church together. The church does not recognize slave/nonslave distinctions as legitimate, but there is still a great deal of tension, and racialized class distinctions still have a lot of traction.

Something I have noticed—this is anecdotal but quite striking—is that it is former noble families who tend to have pictures of their sons in graduation gear displayed in their houses. The children of the nobles are more likely to receive education in Bahir Dar and to obtain some of the new paths to some kind of success—tour guide work, and with it the potential of meeting foreign women and starting relationships with them (see chapter 9). Here again there are important overlaps between clergy and nobility. Many tour guides are the sons of priests, and therefore come from literate homes, which provides a number of benefits for future work opportunities.

By contrast, it is extremely difficult to talk directly to slave descendants about slavery. More commonly, people would tell me general, nonspecific stories that later turned out to have specific personal meaning. One young man, who I later heard was a slave descendant, shared with me a story he had heard about how mothers in Gumuz left their children out in the sun, which was what made them so dark—but then hastened to say that he hated all this talk of color and slavery and considered it all illegitimate when everyone was equally Christian. His father was a singer in the church but also a *debtera* who was said to perform esoteric magic (see chapter 3)—both a pillar of the community and a marginal figure at the same time. This kind of ambiguous status, and ambiguous relationship to the past, seems to be very common among people whose descent gets questioned.

On a separate occasion the same friend told me that he hated that people used the word *bariya*, “slave,” even in jest, as his friends often did. He did not mind *tiquir* as much, even though he acknowledged that the implication was often the same. While calling someone black (as opposed to “red,” the presumptive skin color of Amhara Christians) has generally been a reference to slave descent, among younger people a different understanding of blackness as inclusive of all Ethiopians (vis-à-vis “white” or “red” Europeans) has gained a lot of traction. This is likely due to the influence of Reggae, Rasta, pan-Africanism, and global football, all of which offer different perspectives on skin color. For this young man, it was not blackness itself that was stigmatized, but the slave descent that dark skin was said to indicate.

The only person who ever talked openly about being a slave descendant was Baye Barud, the man in his sixties who unloads the boats when they arrive from Bahir Dar. We sat by the lake and I asked about his family, whereupon he volunteered that his father had been sold to Zege and had married a local woman, but they had later split up. He talked about being separated from his brother in his youth, and about how his father had been betrayed by his own brother. But mainly, he said that he would die in this land, in Zege, by the lake where he had lived and worked all his life. He said that people were never rude to him about his descent, which may be due to widespread affection for a man who had worked hard his whole life, never treated anyone badly, and simply wanted a chance to retire and rest.

The coffee trade brought wealth and slaves to Zege in a way that created lasting social divisions, many of which built on existing, widespread conventions about the difference between landowner-farmers and everyone else. The descendants of those nobles, those slaves, and those coffee trees all remain in Zege today. There is a materiality to the history of labor relations in which the properties of coffee (stimulant and desirable commodity, substance of hospitality, biological species requiring care and maintenance) have played a huge part. Equally important to this material history are notions of when substances become incompatible: refusing to share food with slaves, or, as we shall see, exchanging living beings for silver.

## MORALITY AND SILVER COINS

The story about nobles killing slaves gains much of its power from the silver coins involved. These are Marie-Therese thalers, known locally as *t'egera*. The story of thalers is compelling in itself—minted in eighteenth-century Vienna, they later became the currency of long-distance trade around the perimeter of the Indian ocean, long after they had been discontinued in Europe (Kuroda 2007). People in Zege know a lot about thalers because there are still quite a few of them buried in the peninsula. For a while, people would melt them down into crosses, which would sometimes be sold to tourists, but I am told that recently people have realized that the coins have more value in their original form, as collector's items and historical relics.

Thalers in Ethiopia were used for a very specific purpose: the exchange of long-range trade goods by which relationships between kingdoms were arranged—coffee, civet, ivory, slaves, cardamom, and some others (Pankhurst 1968, Fernyhough 2010). Abdussamad (1997: 548) suggests that the slave and coffee trade became a particularly concentrated phenomenon in Zege, as merchants ploughed their profits from coffee back into slavery. And we can find data from various trade posts along the northeast African route that show the changing prices for slaves, always measured in silver thalers (Fernyhough 2010: 126). So when people tell stories about merchants exchanging human lives for silver, it is because that is exactly what they were doing.

When people tell the story of the killing of the slave, they have handled the exact coins that they are referring to, which have themselves become a part of the physical history of the landscape, just as much as the coffee plants that were the center of everything. This point highlights the extent to which both of Zege's histories are embedded in the material environment. When people tell their history, they are telling the stories of the stuff around them, and one of the things that stuff shows is how thoroughly connected Zege has been to the outside world—both the missionary trajectories of the expansion of Christianity and the trade routes that connected Europe, Sudan, Arabia, and the various parts of Ethiopia. The evidence of these connections is very much something that people in Zege think about, as it is something they grow up with.

Buried treasure is a recurring trope in Ethiopia and always has to do with greed and the illegitimate accumulation of wealth. One of the more widely known examples is of the Sheraton hotel—one of the finest hotels in Africa, a place of high business and an extraordinarily incongruous sight from the road that leads to it, along which there are always numerous people sleeping under sacks and rubbish bags. (The bookshop in the hotel also sells the complete works of Ayn Rand.) A commonly told story holds that the Sheraton lies on the site of a cache of gold buried by the Italians in the 1930s, which *Sheikh* Alamoudi, now the richest man

in Ethiopia, found, perhaps with the help of Italian soldiers, perhaps assisted by the great jazz singer Tilahun Gessesse. The way the story goes, a great python lives under the Sheraton, which is the demon that guarded the gold, which now haunts the building. I discussed this with a former waiter at the Sheraton who told me he was convinced that the place was haunted, and that this was commonly agreed to be the case.

The point is that buried treasure and precious metals are very potent metonyms of selfish accumulation. Their whole point is to last while other things fade, to retain value; but at the same time they are easily stolen. To protect such valuables, it is assumed, you need to make deals with demons. Compare this to the morally positive crops of Zege—hops and perfume leaves—which are perishable and fragrant, to be consumed by neighbors and among guests. They are the stuff of hospitality, which is locally understood as the basis of morally correct relationship-making.

Graeber's distinction between human economies and commodity economies is useful here: a human economy is one where "the primary focus of economic life is on reconfiguring relations between people, rather than the allocation of commodities" (2012: 411). Of course, it may be that these relationships are configured in steep hierarchical fashion, but the point is that such configurations are taken to be morally proper, at least by the church-agrarian hierarchy that sets the prevailing terms of morality. Hospitality relationships are fairly explicitly set against quantified exchange relationships (see the next chapter on relations between merchant exchange and witchcraft): in retellings of the story of the sacrifice of the slave, people often emphasize that the rich man buries the money in the private chamber of his house, which was accessible only to family, rather than in the main room, where one receives guests.

Coffee is interesting and problematic because it has become a medium of both hospitality and quantified exchange. Initially dismissed as a Muslim drink, it has become accepted as a primary medium of hospitality for all Ethiopians: the symbol of the country in the new millennium. But it is also easily packaged, highly desirable for its stimulant qualities, and difficult to grow in many places where it is desired. Coffee moved along the same trade routes as did slaves and silver; in Zege, it seems that slaves and coffee were at many points the only things that people exchanged thalers for.

The contrast between fragrant products and precious metal resonates with Matthew 26: the woman anoints Jesus's feet with perfume; the disciples question why the perfume was not sold and given to the poor; Christ gives his famous response, "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me; when she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial," and then Judas, outraged, agrees to hand over Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

I take the passage to be working with the same kind of opposition that we find in Zege: fragrant products have value in rearranging relations between people. This

is morally preferable to things that can be exchanged for accumulating wealth, and doubly so when it is used to make proper preparations for death. When a product, such as the perfume, can also be sold and transformed into money—and not just money, but tasteless, odorless silver—this is a problem, even if you intend to use the coin for good. The problem is that products of hospitality can never be separated from products of exchange and profit, because silver and money are so effective for transforming value. The logical end point of the problem, in the stories of Judas and of the Zege merchant, is the idea of exchanging a human life for silver, an absurdity that happened rather often in practice, and could only be squared by questioning whether the person being sold was really human at all.

#### CONCLUSION: MORAL SUBSTANCE

I have described life in Zege as built from a set of core prohibitions and mediations. A central concern is the way that materials by which people exchange and connect with one another get organized, controlled, appropriated, and regulated. The correct organization of relationships of blood, reproduction, and feeding, in particular, is a recurrent theme in Zegeña discourses of proper sociality. The church's rules about prohibition and fasting, while central, are only part of the complex dynamics of separation and substance that have emerged from the shared history of the church and the slave trade.

Coffee is a revealing case study for this purpose, because in one product it brings together the church's regulation of labor and production, the moral mediation of local hierarchical relationships, the pact between humanity and God on the part of a founding saint, and the commodity trade relations between Zege and distant areas. Coffee does not remain in a single sphere of exchange, but shifts between hospitality medium, commodity item, and sacred tree. In similar fashion, silver coins can be melted down into crosses, which can then be sold as mementos. It is clearly not the case, then, that the material properties of the medium dictate the sphere in which it will be used. Material things and substances are multifunctional; they exist beyond the uses to which they are put. We can think of these materials as the bearers of history, because it is through them that relationships themselves are made. I would suggest that people in Zege do to a large extent think of history in terms of the substances of mediation and their dissonances.

The stories of *Abune* Betre Maryam and of the merchant sacrificing the slave are “key scenarios” in the social thought of people in Zege (Ortner 1973). There is ample evidence that understanding the role of different material media of sociality, especially as they relate to hierarchy, is necessary if we are to understand why these stories in particular are so gripping. But it is equally important to keep sight of the imaginative work that makes these material media operative.

These are stories about morality and desire, and about the relationship between material life and human imagination, especially our ability to empathize and intuit the feelings and desires of others. Imaginative empathy comes from interacting not just with humans, but with the materials that allow us to infer human intentionality behind them (Gell 1998). Coffee and churches and human bodies make up the tangible, immediate environment of the peninsula, but at the same time they point always to other places and existences beyond themselves—whether it be the trading posts at the Sudanese border, or the waiting gates of heaven and hell.

It is not just contemporaneous worlds that are thinkable; the past accumulates in the soil and the buildings and bodies of Zege (Ingold 2000). Churches stand as evidence of their own centuries of being. Many of the silver coins that used to be traded for people or for coffee are still buried and get unearthed from time to time, and people sell them to tourists who visit the monasteries—tourists who themselves are part of the ongoing connection with far-off places. These connections allow people to imagine a wider world (geographically far, temporally distant, or separated by the difference between flesh and spirit), but also, crucially, to engage with that world, to try to mobilize its resources. This means constantly imagining other people's perspectives, so as to understand what saintly benefactors, trade partners, or demons might want from us. Imagining what others are thinking, in turn, opens up the dual possibility of empathizing with people or manipulating them.

Take the story of the rich man and the slave, which involves a staggering interplay of different levels of empathy and manipulation. First, the tellers of the story understand the motivation of the rich man, to keep his wealth. We infer automatically, of course, that the coins need protecting because other unnamed people covet them. The rich man must be able to understand what demons want and what they are capable of, and must further be able to initiate a pact with them, which is not easy since demons are invisible. When he slaughters the slave (with the connotations of killing an animal), he must presumably sever any sense of empathy or commonality—or perhaps the point is that he must give up something close to him. Finally, the listener cannot help but think about the perspective of the slave, no matter how hard the culture at large works to present slaves and their descendants as polluting, dangerous outcasts. That is a very great deal of imaginative work surrounding a few silver coins.

Blood, on the other hand, evokes a very different kind of imaginative empathy: an almost inescapable idiom of shared life and shared mortality, particularly for anyone who has ever slaughtered an animal (Feeley-Harnik 1995). Carsten (2013: S17) points out a shared potential of blood and money to flow “between domains, although in radically different ways. Here the fact that silver money can be stored, accumulated, kept secret, and used to buy and sell trade goods contrasts with a single-domain transfer of blood, between life and death. In Ethiopian Orthodox thought, blood can be seen both as the vessel of life (Ficquet 2006) and as a source

of pollution and fear. As such it epitomizes the conflict between vitality and order that underlies the prohibition system.

Time and again, we will see how the key substances of mediation are those that mark or call into question the boundaries of humanity. At the primary level, the spilling of blood marks the breach of the integrity of an individual's body, either in injury or in reproduction. But at the second level of the imagery of sacrifice, we see a more general questioning of what is human. The archetypal blood sacrifice for Orthodox Christians is the Crucifixion, repeated in the Eucharist, in which the flow of Christ's blood enables the salvation of humankind (Paulos 1988: 171). It is possible because Christ is both human and God.

The sacrifice of the slave inverts the archetype; it is quintessentially immoral, serves the ends of the sacrifice alone rather than the community, and is possible because the slave is human but is treated as an animal. Yet the story absolutely requires the tacit recognition of the slave's humanity; if he were just thought to be an animal, it would not have any interest or moral force.

The link between slavery and sacrifice thus offers a key to understanding religious thought in Zege as premised on the management of the substances of the body and the substances that feed the body. Idioms of sacrifice relate these substances to external powers; they principally relate to the power of God, but they proximally relate to demons. But the moral model of sacrifice built around the Eucharist and around Hebraic traditions cannot quite encompass the history of slavery and the coffee commodity. These present moral dilemmas that are still recounted in terms of the exchange of substance and its regulation, as stories of blood, silver, and hierarchy.

#### NOTES

1. The arrival date of coffee in this part of Ethiopia is contested. It seems that the original manuscript of the Acts of Betre Maryam said that the three plants were hops, buckthorn, and fruit, and later additions clarify that the fruit was coffee (Cerulli 1946). This would fit with external sources that suggest coffee arrived in this part of Ethiopia in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century (Merid 1988, Pankhurst 1968).

2. Pankhurst (1968: 202) notes that coffee was flourishing in Zege by 1830.

3. Comparing different accounts and drawing on Binayew and Bosc-Tiessé, I have still not been able to ascertain for certain when taxation was due only to the church, and when residents were relieved of tax entirely. In any case, the narrative of monasteries as bulwarks against state taxation is of clear importance.

4. In the 1940s, by contrast when taxation was enforced on the churches, local officials are said to have replied *Inkwan Zege Eyerusalemim Geberallech* "Let alone Zege, even Jerusalem has paid tribute" (Binayew 2014: 46).