

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at:  
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240666214>

# Fifty Years of Bleeding

Article *in* The Ecumenical Review · January 1999

DOI: 10.1111/j.1758-6623.1999.tb00374.x

---

READS

14

1 author:



Musa W Dube

University of Botswana

33 PUBLICATIONS 101 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

---

# Fifty Years of Bleeding

A Storytelling Feminist Reading  
of Mark 5:24-43

*Musa W. Dube Shomanah*

---

This paper is based on three texts: (1) an African oral tale of a young girl who is buried by her friends but sings out from her grave, telling her story; (2) a biblical tale of a bleeding woman (Mark 5:35-43) who had visited many physicians until all her money was spent while she got worse; (3) the story of Africa in the past fifty years, covering the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the struggle for independence and independence, and the neo-colonial, globalization and AIDS periods. The paper views this history through a gender lens, by placing a woman in the middle of the story of Africa, both as one who defies death by continuing to sing from the many graves of her contexts and as a bleeding woman who fully participates in the search for healing<sup>1</sup> and survival on the African continent.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, it is still *A luta continua!* – the struggle continues.

Mama Africa as a character thus personifies the story of Africa. Her role exposes the various gender oppressions and other forms of oppression encountered by African women (and the people of Africa in general), yet highlights their will to arise. The latter is dramatized by the repeated song and by Mama Africa's surprising assumption of power, when she calls *Thalitha Cum!* ["Little girl, arise!"] to those who have been buried by various forms of oppression. While the paper does not expressly describe its method and theories of analysis, it draws on the theories of social location, reader-response, gender-feminist and contextual biblical reading. These theories hold that all readers interpret the text according to their social experiences and contexts.<sup>3</sup>

A large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve [fifty] years. **She had endured much under many physicians, and spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.** She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well..."

## Scene I – Dr Colonial Master: 1939-49

*Ngubani o gamla lapha, nqo* ["Knock, knock, who is there?"]

*Yimi e ngamla lapha, nqo* ["It's me cutting firewood around"]

---

● Musa W. Dube Shomanah is a lecturer in New Testament at the University of Botswana, Gaborone. She has also taught New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, Tennessee (USA).

*Ufike utshele uMama lo Baba* ["Please, take a message to my parents"]  
*Uthi uAfrica/nthenthle zandleni ka sekho* ["Tell them that I am no more"]  
*Ngoba banqebhela e mhlathini we bundla* ["For they buried me here"]  
*ka ku sa iyewa* ["And abandoned me here"]

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess called Africa. She built her summer palace on the Great Zimbabwe by the art of patience and endurance, cutting, carrying and laying one little rock after another. She built her winter parlour in the golden sands of Egypt by the community spirit of all her children, who cut and pulled heavy rocks in the sand for years. She grazed her cattle on the Great Lakes of the East and ploughed her fields on the sand banks of the Nile. There she struggled and triumphed, fighting many natural disasters of floods and droughts. She showered in the waterfalls of Mosi oa thunya (Victoria Falls) and she painted her art on the rocks of the Tsodilo caves of the South. She took walks on the seashores of the West. Africa, a tall and bouncy girl, walked freely from one end of her land to another, visiting the shrines, offering sacrifices to the Divine, fighting and surviving disasters, but always bringing enough food for her household.

During the day, Africa's children played under the bright and blue sky that was graced by the unfailing sun. During the night, her children slept under the luxurious roof of a million stars. In their dreams, Africa's children laughed with the moon. When morning came, Africa's children woke up singing with a million birds of the valley. In the mid-morning, Africa's children went down to the river to play with the frogs. When the sun went down, Africa's children danced to welcome each star in the sky. And when all the stars were planted in the sky, the moon emerged to tell them tales around the fire. Her brothers, uncles, husbands and fathers spent their days tending their animals and plants, mining and carving, hunting and watching the children as they played. And always bringing sufficient food to the household. Africa blossomed in self-sufficiency, survival, health and peace.

But in the year 1939, Africa woke up severely ill. She felt walls had entered into all of her body. She felt fenced, bound. Africa cried out saying, "Take this thorn of suffering away from my flesh! Take it away!" And as she spoke, she began to bleed non-stop. Just then Dr Colonial Master appeared, saying, "I am the healer of all diseases. But in order to heal this kind of disease, I have to take you into my hospital. I have to watch you very closely, teach you what you need to learn and what you need to know. Basically, what you need most is the medicine of civilization."

Africa entered Dr Colonial Master's hospital, and she was put to sleep with heavy medication. She slept for ten years. Lying limp, she heard the distant sound of her children's joy disappear into the air. She heard no more the voices of her brothers, uncles, fathers and husbands, for they had disappeared into the mines, the plantations and the farms to work for Dr Colonial Master. But in the year 1949, Dr Colonial Master seemed preoccupied by issues of his homeland. He no longer had enough time to treat Africa in the mornings. Picking up her clothes and still bleeding, Africa escaped into the bush. This is how she came to meet her new physician, Comrade Dr Struggle-for-Independence.

## **Scene II – Dr Struggle-for-Independence: 1949-69**

When Africa escaped from her captor, she yearned for a revitalizing shower in the waterfalls of Mosi oa thunya. As she got closer, she heard the soothing sound of the

falls. But when she arrived there, she found Mosi oa thunya fenced in, with a sign posted: “Victoria Falls”.

“Victoria? Who is Victoria?”, Africa muttered audibly. And off she went to her palace in the Great Zimbabwe. But when she arrived there she found that it too was fenced in. A porter standing by the gate said to her, “This is the home of Dr Colonial Master. Are you one of his domestic servants or are you seeking to be one?”

Shaking her head, and still bleeding, Africa headed to her grazing lands in the Great Lakes of the East. She wanted to find her people, her cattle and her farms. As she came closer, she saw the beautiful valley that sprawled peacefully in front of her. She saw her cattle grazing in the green pastures. The memory of happy times gripped her. She ran down, but a young herdsman – who looked just like one of her many children – came hurriedly to meet her. “Mum,” he said, “this land and these cattle belong to Dr Colonial Master. Are you one of his domestic servants or do you seek to be one?”

“Are you telling me that this very land and cattle belong to Dr Colonial Master?”

“Yes, Mum. It is so.”

“Then tell me how I can get to my farms along the fertile banks of the Nile and to my winter home in the golden sands of Egypt?”

“Your farms? Along the Nile? There is the missionary road to the North.”

Africa turned to the North. As she came close to the Nile, the sweet smell of its fertile sandbanks tingled her nose, and the memory of happy times gripped her. She began to run with excitement. But as she was running, she was brought to a sudden stop by a fence with a large sign announcing in bold letters: “No trespassing. This territory belongs to Dr Colonial Master.” Africa turned back towards the rocks of Tsodilo in the South, where she decided to express her fears in a painting. But there, too, a porter met her by the gate declaring, “Mum, black people are not allowed in this resort area. Are you one of Dr Colonial Master’s domestic servants or do you seek to be one?”

Shocked, shaking and still bleeding, Africa turned towards the West. The sun was setting when she began to cut firewood in the rocky and barren land where she found herself. The pain of the capture of her children, people, land and property was excruciating. Africa cried out from her anguish, saying, “Take this thorn away from my body! Take it away!” Just then a voice broke her despair, singing and saying:

*Ngubani o gamla lapha, nqo  
Yimi e ngi gamla lapha, nqo  
Ufike utshele umama lo baba  
Uthi uTentelezandleni ka sekho  
Ngoba bamqebela emhlathini  
we bundla ka kusaiwa*

She heard her own beloved child singing, calling out, saying, “Who is there? Who is there? Who is cutting here? Please, go and inform our parents that we have been buried right here in our own land and left to die.”

Seized by anger, Africa called out, “*Talitha Cum*”, which means “Little girl, arise!” And behold, the bellies of the earth opened. UTentelezandleni jumped out. She was followed by all the beloved old women and men. Miriam Makeba emerged with her new song: Mozambique (*A luta continua*), Botswana (*A luta continua*), Zimbabwe (*A luta continua*), Namibia (*A luta continua*), South Africa (*A luta continua*).

As she sang, the ground shook and broke open again. And there came from the ground the many handsome sons and daughters of Africa: Kwame Nkrumah, Nehanda, Julius Nyerere, Hastings Banda, Chinua Achebe, Kenneth Kaunda, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Milton Obote, Seretse Khama, Joshua Nkomo, Buchi Emecheta, P.G Matante, Samora Machel, Robert Mugabe, Winnie Madikizela, Nelson Mandela and others. There was much joy and weeping as they saw each other again after such a long time. They told each other the stories of how Dr Colonial Master had captured and confined them. Yet many more daughters and sons were missing or dead. Africa wept. She wept for the lost children of her womb.

Seeing her tears, all the able-bodied young adults said, "We cannot live like this. We have to fight for our liberation." Many of her children who lived in North America were also heard saying, "Back to Africa! Harambee! Africa shall be free!" Just then the booming voice of Mzwake Mbule, yet to be born, was heard shouting from the future: "Do something to facilitate change in Africa. Let it be done before dawn."<sup>4</sup> And the children of Africa rose and said, "We must go out and fight Dr Colonial Master. We must recapture all that belongs to us. It is the only solution."

"Do you want to leave me again?" Africa asked.

Kwame, her first-born son, turned to her and said, "Mama Africa, stay right here in this infertile land with the young children and the old people. Take care of them while we fight for independence. It is the struggle for independence that will give you healing. It is the only solution to your suffering."

And her last-born son, tall and regal, Nelson Mandela, said, "Mama Africa, the struggle is my life, for my freedom and that of my people cannot be separated."<sup>5</sup> From that day on, Africa became Mama Africa: the strong black woman who carries us all on her back.

Shaking and still bleeding, Mama Africa was left in the barren, crowded lands to plough and fend for her young children, old people and all those who were struggling in the guerrilla warfare for independence. For many years she took care of everyone to ensure that independence would come to heal the land and all the peoples. Guns would sound, bombs would explode and the heart would shudder in fear during the night. Slogans would be chanted: *Kwacha-ngwee! A luta continua! Bambiri ne chimurenga! Amandla nga wethu; Mayibuye iAfrica!*

And many more of her boys and girls would disappear and join the shouts of the comrades, of the struggle for independence. While many others were forced to work in the farms, plantations and mines of Dr Colonial Master, Mama Africa herself laboured both in the farms of Dr Colonial Master and in her own fields. She produced food for those at home and for those at war – for the oppressed and for the oppressor.

The years of the struggle dragged on. Blood flowed from her body until all the rivers of Africa were red and the land began to stink with the stench of death. That is when Mama Africa stood up and shouted, "Take this thorn away from my body! Take it away!" Just then a horn sounded, and liberty was announced throughout the land. Viva! Victory was certain! And that is how Mama Africa came to meet her new physician, Dr Independence.

### **Scene III – Dr Independence: 1969-79**

Weak and still bleeding, the heart of Mama Africa rejoiced in hope. Independence was here! *Amandla nga wethu!* Power to the people! Healing was certain. She rejoiced

at the prospect of getting back all her children again; getting back her power, her honour and her share in the struggle for independence. Mama Africa was ready for the healing of her own body.

Indeed, her sons and daughters did arrive in the crowded villages, singing songs of victory. Drums were sounded. There was dancing. There was singing. There was joy. Mama Africa ululated, “*lelelele!*” She sang along and danced along. Thanksgivings were offered to the Divine.

When the day ended, her sons pulled away, back to the towns and cities; back to sleep in the fortresses built by Dr Colonial Master. Mama Africa and her daughters were left in the rocky, crowded and barren lands to produce food for those in towns and in the villages. Her grazing land, her fields, her palaces, her caves did not return to her. “Plantations produce the crops that we need to export. *Mosi oa thunya*, the Great Zimbabwe, the Egyptian pyramids and Tsodilo are essential to attract tourists,” she was told. “Stay where you are and produce food for the nation, Mama Africa.” Most of her daughters who were in the struggle for independence were also left at home, alongside their mother.

Weak and still bleeding, Mama Africa struggled and toiled in the hospital of Dr Independence. Again there were wars. Now the sons of Mama Africa were fighting among themselves. Guns and bombs exploded. Young boys and girls disappeared. Her children dodged death or died in the very air they breathed. Young children took arms, went to war and were killed. The genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda claimed multitudes. Mama Africa’s Somalian children starved until they were skeletal bones, while warlords made war, not love. Landmines were planted, and playing boys and girls lost their limbs and legs until they learned how not to play. Mama Africa could not plant any more crops, for the fields had already been planted – with mines. She could not walk freely again, for her body was full of explosives. She was confined, afraid to set one foot outside her yard lest she step on a mine. Once more, she was buried in a hole. But one day she heard in the distance the sound of someone chopping, and she cried out, saying:

*Ngubane o gamla lapha, nqo*  
*Yimi engamla lapha, nqo*  
*Ufike utshele umama lo baba*  
*Uthi Africa ka sekho*  
*Goba ba nqibhela e mhlathini*  
*We bundla ka kusayywa*

And, indeed, help came. International organizations arrived. Church organizations arrived to facilitate reconciliation. International financial bodies arrived to lend money. International donors were ready to give aid to resuscitate the devastated economies.

Mama Africa was ready for a much-needed rest. That is how she met a new physician: Dr Neo-Colonialism, who also goes by the name Dr Global Village.

#### **Scene IV – Dr Neo-Colonialism/Dr Global Village: 1979-89**

Still sick and bleeding, Mama Africa heard about the miracle of external aid, which would bring an end to the poverty that had befallen her land and children. The qualified players and planners were numerous, among them the International Mone-

tary Fund and the World Bank. Soon Mama Africa was receiving millions of dollars. She was even wearing the imported garments of Democracy.

Mama Africa heard of the millions of dollars that were flowing in to build roads and bridges. She heard about the Structural Adjustment Programmes. She heard how money would also be coming her way to develop her and how plans were being made regarding the kind of projects she should undertake: projects that were familiar neither to her nor to her ancestors. Not even to her land. And that is how she used the aid that came – as a medicine prescribed by Dr Neo-Colonialism, the physician.

Still bleeding, Mama Africa partook of the prescribed medicine of developmental projects. But aid turned to debt. Africa had received millions of dollars and now owed billions of dollars. Her economies had been bad but now they were ruined. Africa and all her people were now labouring to pay off enormous debts, working simply to pay off this new physician, for he is the new colonial master. Dr Neo-Colonialism continues to give Africa and her children some medicine to keep them alive and working: to keep them paying the debt.

Shaking and still bleeding, Mama Africa was visited by a new physician. Dr Global Village offered a different medicine. "I can heal you, Mama Africa, just like I can heal the whole world of all its pains. My prescriptions are simple: I will do away with national boundaries. I will strengthen regional trade. I will prescribe unlimited trade across the globe. I will require competition, and my multinational corporations will create jobs for you."

Mama Africa made her last bet – taking the prescriptions of Dr Global Village. Mama Africa also saw with her eyes the arrival of chain stores and companies in her land. Suddenly, there was Coca-Cola and Pepsi, Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's and Wimpy, BP, Hyundai, CNN. The colours were the same everywhere. They brought the touch of foreign sophistication. When the multinational companies came, bringing jobs for Africa, the local companies were bought out. Mama Africa and all her people began to work for the big multinational companies. But soon after, high-tech machines rolled in, replacing her children. They were retrenched, asked to go home to their cramped lands.

That is when Mama Africa realized that Dr Global Village was a twin brother of Dr Neo-Colonialism and a grandson of Dr Colonial Master. At this moment Africa's currencies suffered major devaluations. And while Asian economies were catching the flu from the impact of globalization, Africa caught a more deadly disease: AIDS. And Mama Africa had no more money to buy any prescriptions from any doctor.

### **AIDS: Mama Africa Is Coming Up Behind Jesus! 1989-98**

Still bleeding and searching for healing, Mama Africa is struck by a new disease: AIDS. She is now a nurse. She runs home-based care centres for her dying children and people. She washes them, feeds them, holds them in her arms and rocks them, singing a little song, while she awaits their death. And when they finally die, she rises to close their eyes, to wrap them and bury them. Mama bears in her own flesh the wounds of their suffering. And they die in her loving arms.

Mama Africa was burying this morning and this afternoon she will bury again. And tomorrow morning she will put away yet another of her precious gems. And in the afternoon she will bury again. At this moment, Mama Africa is nursing a sister, an uncle, a brother with one hand; and with her other hand she is holding a dying child

and feeding many, many orphans. She has closed many homes and villages, and she will close many more. Mama Africa is once more confined, caring for the sick and dying. Just a few minutes ago, she was sitting here in her home, feeling like a motherless child, when she heard a crowd in the distance streaming into Zimbabwe, into Harare. Africa, in dire straits, stood right here and began to call out singing;

*Ngobani o gamla lapha, nqo  
Yemi e gamla lapha, nqo,  
Ufike utshele uMama lo Baba  
Uthi uTentelezandlene ka sekho,  
Ngoba ba nqebhela emhlathini we bundla ka kusaiwa*

When she called out, “Who is there? Who is there?”, she was told, “Jesus Christ, the healer of all diseases, is passing by.” She heard that Jesus is on his way to heal a little girl who is already dead, the daughter of Jairus.

Mama Africa is standing up. She is not talking. She is not asking. She is not offering any more money – for none is left. Mama Africa is coming behind Jesus. She is pushing through a strong human barricade of crowds. *Weak and still bleeding but determined, she is stretching out her hands. If only she can touch the garments of Jesus Christ...*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Healing” in this text is used to denote the entire well-being of all aspects of a human being: economic, political, social, spiritual, the physical body, etc.

<sup>2</sup> This paper cannot pretend either to speak for the whole continent of Africa or that African women are identical. Africa and African women are extremely diverse, according to their class, race, education, ethnicity, culture, nationality, religion, region, etc. The “Africa”, “African woman” or “Mama Africa” presented in this paper should be seen for what it is: a gender-feminist view or construction of one African woman of Botswana. Many will empathize and identify with some parts of this perspective and story; many more will feel estranged from it, for it does not and cannot speak for all African women and people. I am grateful to Peter Mikwisa, Seratwa Ntloedibe and Dumisani Mmualefe, who read this paper and have enhanced its quality with their useful comments.

<sup>3</sup> While twelve years in the biblical story (Mark 5:25) is recognized to represent Israel, the fifty years in the title of this paper represents Africa and interweaves it with the fifty years of World Council of Churches, for whose 50th anniversary assembly this paper was written.

<sup>4</sup> From Mzwake Mbule, *Mzwake: Now Is the Time*, BMG Records Africa, 1994, a compact disk of poetic music.

<sup>5</sup> See Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, London, Little, Brown, 1994, pp.455f.