

## Sense and Nonesense in the Oedipus And Matrilineal Complexes: A Comparative Analysis, 1900-2000

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### Abstract

*The mother's brother is the appointed guardian of her and her family. Yet, this is a duty [traditionally imposed] which both weighs heavily upon him, and is not always grateful and pleasantly received by his wards [sister's children].*

### Introduction

Matrilineality, seemingly, is the converse of the Oedipus and male supremacist complexes. These complexes, while continuous sources of "embarrassment and confusion to advocates of women's right"<sup>1</sup> is seemingly, again, synonymous and coterminous to the strength accorded womanhood by matriculture vis-à-vis the Oedipus complex. The fear by women that it is natural for men to dominate them is groundless even in addition to the "use of sex for the nurturance of aggressive male personalities".<sup>2</sup> Male supremacist tendencies have been inescapable responses to "reproductive and ecological pressures" and not as byproducts of "human nature" among the Cross River Igbo. Matriliney is not just an institution that has over the years moderated male power and authority; and not also the non-total subjugation of the womenfolk by the men. Rather, matriliney technically provided an alternative and a comparative to the Oedipus complex.

## Theorization

Although Sigmund Freud, over time, received unsparing criticisms by feminists for his notion of penis envy, or “the girls perception of herself and all those like her as inferior castrates”, and on the assumption of male superiority, his work on female sexuality cannot be dismissed with a mere wave of the hand.<sup>3</sup> According to Freud:

Children go through distinct psychosexual development stages, and the temperament of any given adult is the product of how he/she deals with these stages. Gender in other words, is the product of sexual maturation. Because they experience their sexuality differently (as a result of biology), girls and boys ultimately end up with contrasting gender roles.<sup>4</sup>

If men adjust to their sexual maturation normally (that is, typically), they will end up displaying expected masculine traits, if women develop normally, they will end up displaying expected feminine traits.<sup>5</sup>

Although Freud admitted to some extent we are all androgynous, he wanted to say that by virtue of anatomy, women should develop feminine traits and men’s masculine ones.<sup>6</sup> The basis for these conclusions is to be found in Freud’s three treatises to the theory of sexuality.

Particularly, in the second treatise, *Infantile Sexuality*, Freud surveyed the sexual stages of the human infant. It is premised on the correlation of sexual activity with reproductive genital sexuality that must involve sexual intercourse whereas adults thought that children were sexless. Freud’s argument, however, was that children’s sexuality was “polymorphous perverse”, whereas as far as the infant was concerned, its entire body, and especially its orifices and appendages, are sexual terrains.

The infant usually moved from this type of “pervase” sexuality to normal “heterosexual genital sexuality by passing through several stages,<sup>7</sup> as follows:

- i. During the *Oral Stage*, the infant receives pleasure from suckling his/her mother’s breast and also the next best thing, his/her thumb;
- ii. During the *Anal Stage*, the two or three-year-old child particularly enjoys the sensations associated with controlling the expulsion of his/her feces;
- iii. During the *Phallic Stage*, the three or four-year-old child discovers the pleasure potential of the genitals and either resolves or fails to resolve the so-called Oedipus and castration complexes;
- iv. At around the age of six, the child ceases to display overt sexuality and begins a period of latency that ends around puberty, at which time the young person enters the *Genital Stage* which is characterized by a resurgence of sexual impulses. If all goes according to plan, the *libido* (defined by Freud as undifferentiated sexual energy; and biologically a very potent one) will be directed outwards, away from autoerotic stimulation, and toward a member of the opposite sex;<sup>8</sup> and the first opposite sex member is usually the mother.

As explained by Freud in the third treatise, *The Transformation of Puberty*, it is at this critical juncture in the child’s psychosexual drama (development) that the Oedipus and castration (fears) complexes are resolved.

The psychoanalytic doctrine of anatomical distinction between the sexes has up played the fact that because boys have penises while the girls do not fundamentally affects the way in which boys and girls go about resolving the complexes of the phallic stage. The boy’s Oedipus complex

stems from his natural attachment to his mother who nurtures him. Consequently, the boy oedipally wants to posses her, have sexual intercourse with her and to kill his father, the rival for his attentions.

Freud, however, postulated that this desire is short-lived because the boy has good and enough reasons to dread his father who unarguably is an embodiment of authority under which the mother lives and adheres to. Having seen either his mother or some other females naked, the boy speculates that these creatures without penises have been castrated, by his father no less.<sup>9</sup> Shaken by this thought, the boy fears his father will castrate him should he dare to act upon his desires for mother. A painful psychoanalytic process, the boy out of this fear squelches his love for the mother; and, rather, begins to develop what has been referred to as the *Superego*.

The attempt made so far has been a theorectization of the Oedipus complex vis-à-vis matriculture and the matrilineal complex; and the connect in the concepts. What could be the connect between a boy wishing to kill his father in order to marry the mother and the socio-cultural preferences of the peoples of the Cross River Igbo area towards the motherline. While, as Freud argued, the boy suppresses the Oedipal wish through morality and discipline, his activities are continuously informed or constructed around the complex the same way the men are attached to the matrilineages and their sisters within the matrilineal complex.

Whether it is Oedipal or matrilineal, the attachment to the mother (to the extent of wishing to marry her) or to the matrilineage (where the boys, and males, in general, get inheritance from), it is, according to Allen W. Johnson and Douglas Price-Williams:

Some sort of struggle between an older, father-like man and a younger man who stands in a son-like relationship to him, and an inappropriate closeness, often erotic between the younger man and a motherly woman.<sup>10</sup>

The erotic intent towards one's mother in an Oedipal complex is analogous to the enatic attachment in a matrilineal complex in a matrilineage which forms the cultural point of reference and of inheritance among the Cross River Igbo.

In some of the origin legends of matriliney among the Cross River Igbo communities, such as the Abam and Ihechiowa, it is recounted how a man bequeathed all his property to the sister for providing one of her sons for proxy sacrifice in order to cleanse the land of the 'murder' abomination, **Ochu**, he committed against it. The explanation to this legend is definitely Oedipal and in this case matrilineal. The point/time this occurred does not matter so long as there is 'erotic-love' connect between brother and sister (boy/man and girl/mother) to have enunciated the matrilineal complex. In an earlier theorization, while morality and discipline moderated the antagonistic intents of the boy towards the father who equally exuded fear into him, the reposition of authority in a matrilineage on the most senior male (uncle) equally moderated the activities of the men vis-à-vis their sisters and mothers against their biological fathers who was, and still is, traditionally an outsider in the mother-son-children relationships.

While folkloristic, the historicity of the one-off event in the Cross River Igbo area which incited the material *largesse* to a sister and children, and which similar tales exist in different parts of the world, such as the Oedipus Rex, Hamlet and Alladin, are exemplifications of "Oedipal triumphs": An obvious preference and tilt towards the women in a "love-hate" nexus. This family-kindred-lineage complex is often garnished with much of the incest deeds and violence which facts are coterminous with the matrilineal complex, in general. Since, unarguably, the Oedipus complex is universalistic, studies of the matrilineal practices among the Abam, Amaseri and Ihechiowa, portray obvious intensity. While some commentators have criticized Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic disposition as emanating from his Viennese societal experience and described him as a self-satisfied patriarch, the Oedipal concept/complex is human universal. According to Johnson and Price-Williams:

Family conflict may well be a human universal, but the strength of the conflicts, and the particular forms they take, is open to wide variation, just as the family and its community context varies widely from one society to the next.<sup>11</sup>

While unable to douse the universalism concept, some psychoanalysts have regarded the “Oedipal situation”:

As a developmental stage that can be successfully, even “joyfully”, negotiated if the child is treated from birth with appropriate empathy and acknowledgment by its caregivers.<sup>12</sup>

Naturally, there is always a latent contest between father and son over mother/wife either for love or protection, on the one hand and/or of covetousness, on another. The Oedipus complex has been elevated from the nuclear family level to the lineage or kindred level. Among the Cross River Igbo, the uncles, in an avunculature, are over-protective of their sisters in the matrilineage and in continuous quest for authority over their sisters' offspring and their protection against their biological fathers and legal husbands who at the end of the tunnel remain outsiders and in extreme cases, strangers. The matrilineal complex does not recognize the husbands and biological fathers of their sisters and nephews and nieces not in a love contest but for the economic possibilities of remittances that will be made by the offspring of their sisters.

While the uncles in a sister-brother-matrikin nexus is swayed by economics, it is still Oedipal in the sense that the intent of sisters' brothers was, and still is, protectionist against husbands who do not have the economic clout vis-à-vis the matrilineage to effectively cater for their sisters.

Moreover, inheritance was lineage-based and the husbands belonged to matrilineages other than those of their wives. Thus, protecting their sisters was an obvious insurance for getting inheritance. Even so, their own children belonged to their wives' matrilineages. At another level, the sons do not deal with their fathers but with their matrilineal uncles who were ever over protective of their mothers in mother/sister-uncle-husband-son relationships. This is the family-lineage matrilineal complex.

As mentioned elsewhere in the thesis, matriculture, therefore, the matrilineal-Oedipal-type complex is supported by a socio-political organization which is acephalous, small-scale and with a horticultural based agriculture; and varies from the complexes observable in centralized societies. According to Johnson and Price-Williams:

Tales [myths] in smaller [acephalous, non-centralized] societies are more blatant in presenting sexual and aggressive actions [than] in complex societies where delicacy and deception mask the passions at the core of the [myths].<sup>13</sup>

The thoughts being expressed are the universalist concepts of the Oedipus complex of father-mother-son relationships which have added dimensions in the matrilineal to the father-son-mother-uncles relationships. Both the Oedipus and matrilineal complexes have Oedipal dimensions of tinges of envy and protection/covetousness.

### **Psychoanalysis of the Matrilineal and Oedipus Complexes**

The universality or validity of Freud's psychoanalytic theories of the Oedipus complex is not the object for analysis here, but an anthropological consideration as it connects with matriliney. The nexus between the Oedipus and matrilineal complexes could be found in the origin legends of the Abam, Amaseri and Ihechiowa. The legend recounts how some women farmed the harsh tropical environment of the Cross River valley, retained

these portions of land and handed them down to their daughters but be overseen by their brothers in societies that had attained the highest degree of masculinization because of the insecurity that pervaded this area in pre-colonial times as a result of warfare and the slave trade. This is the most probable entering point of the men of the matrilineages as managers of their sisters/mothers estates.

It could also be argued that it was this responsibility that made a sister to provide her son, in a brother-sister complex, to be sacrificed for an abomination which he committed against the earth deity which is women-specific. There are similar myths that apotheosize the womenfolk in content. For instance, it is recounted in a myth how the *Agadinwanyi* Nteje sacrificed herself for the cure of an epidemic which killed many of the inhabitants of Nteje. According to Osuagwu and Okoko:

The Agadinwanyi 'Alusi' cult of Nteje remains efficacious today. It originated when a woman sacrificed herself to be buried alive for the sake of the Nteje community, in the Oyi Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. She is supreme in Nteje.<sup>14</sup>

This event created an Oedipal mother-love-community situation/complex. The matrilineal complex, transmuted from the father-son-mother twist to the uncle-sister-son complex like the Oedipus complex conditioned groups and communities in their evolution and instincts from the animal to human vis-à-vis emotional life. Totems and taboos equally underpinned the evolution or development of the human persons and were relevantly applied by them. Rehearsing Freud, Johnson and Price-Williams said:

Our animal antecedents were impulsive in seeking sexual pleasure and venting aggression. In particular, they were promiscuous sexually and males used violence to monopolize females. Humans, by contrast, carefully control sex and

aggression, providing only a few proper outlets for the expression of either. [In retrospect] at the heart of tribal society was the clan with two key prohibitions: first, a clan totem animal which no member of the clan could kill or eat; and second, marriage rules (exogamy) prohibiting marriage within the clan. These ancient prohibitions [controlled] powerful and basic human desires.

<sup>15</sup>

The matrilineal ‘Oedipal’ complex is female supremacist or ‘sexually balanced institutional complex’ that was parallel to the male supremacist institutions which have been created, as mentioned earlier, by the events of the period of warfare which conditioned the males to aggressive responses and from which naturally the females were excluded. The matrilineal complex, although male chauvinist anthropologists have tended to overlook, was a complex that moderated male powers among the Cross River Igbo. They would rather have written about “uxorilocal postmarital residence” or a nice case of “matrilineal descent with polyandry”. <sup>16</sup>

As mentioned earlier, this section considers the anthropological dimensions of the matrilineal ‘Oedipal’ complex the matrilineal complex was supported by factors, such as, first, descent being traced to a female ancestor and second, married children could remain with their mother in a matrilocal or natolocal residence pattern. According to Harris, another cultural twist which aided the spawning of the matrilineal complex and which exacerbated the son-uncle-father conflicts is that:

Married male children stop living with the mother and take up residence in her brother’s household. This pattern, called avunculocality (residence with the avunculus, the Latin word for mother’s brother), implies that it is the mother’s brother who controls the kin group’s

children and property even though descent is in the female line.<sup>17</sup>

The matrilineal complex is an example of male servanthood. While polyandry is not practiced by males as wife-husbands per se, the females have much social and sexual latitude to have as many male consorts as they could manage. This was often supported by their brothers in the Cross River Igbo area to the discomfiture of their husbands who are outsiders and strangers in the wives' matrilineages. This analysis has portrayed a son-avunculus-father relationship which is definitely Oedipal since the son is in constant conflictual situation to the extent of death wish over the mother on the one hand, and avunculus-father conflict over the wife/sister, children and paternity, on the other. Another twist in the matrilineal complex is conflict between wives and husbands' sisters. According to Harris:

Shifts from patrilineal to matrilineal organizations originate as an attempt on the part of absentee males to turn over the care of jointly owned houses, lands, and property to their sisters. Absentee males rely on their sisters rather than their wives because wives are drawn from someone else's paternal interest group and have divided loyalties.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, there are conflicts between husbands' sisters and husbands' wives which presuppose a sister-brother and not husband-wife bond/situation. There is definitely a protectionist undertone, therefore, a brother-sister love and Oedipal. Matrilineal males would rather extend material largesse to their sisters whose children belong to her matrilineage to the benefit of their uncles who they will make remittances to later in life.

To further portray the matrilineal 'Oedipal' complex, Harris continued that:

Sisters who stay at home, however, have the same property interests as brothers. Absentee brothers, therefore, discourage marriages which would remove their [loved] sisters from the household in which they grew up together.

<sup>19</sup>

Even when the sisters marry from within the matrilineal communities, they are still under the protection of their brothers who are perpetually in love-protection tangles with sisters' husbands. The females find themselves in-between husbands-brothers and between brothers-sons/offspring tangles. Unlike in the Oedipus complex where the love-hate nexus is between son and father in quest of mother's love, it is between the son and uncle (avunculus) in the matrilineal complex. Even so:

Sisters are only too happy to comply since patrilocal marriage exposes them to the abuses at the hands of male supremacist husbands and un-sympathetic fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law. <sup>20</sup>

Seemingly, from this easy acquiescence of sisters vis-à-vis their brothers is a return of love and an inability to sever their relationships in total disregard to the feelings of their husbands in contradistinction to their avuncular brothers and sons. The matrilineal 'Oedipal' complex has further been exacerbated by the contraption of endogamic marriages within the matrilineages referred to as **Nwannediya** (husband's sister) and seemingly exogamic marriages with father's nieces, referred to as **Nwannadiya** (husband's cousin).

While these marriages are permissible within acceptable time generational gap, they do not preclude incest since there will always be a blood relations no matter the remoteness of time lapse. The pervasive nature of the matrilineal complex is that the matrilineal communities of the

Abam, Amaseri and Ihechiowa, did not frown at such relationships. To the brothers, any construct that made the sisters stay back in the matrilineages were traditionally permissible. The Oedipus complex factor has always been subsumed under the factors of reproduction, prolongation and perpetuation of the matrilineages. It was to the extent, in pre-colonial times, that the matrilineal males owned the reproductive rights of their sisters and tenaciously protected them against extraneous males who could appropriate this right in name of being husbands and, in turn, deny them of the right to remittances from their sisters' offspring which were provided in the forms of cash and/or services.

These, unarguably, incestuous affinal marriages overrode Freud's Totems and Taboos vis-à-vis rules and prohibitions which according to him:

Primitives were imbued with a "horror of incest" so great that they not only prohibited marriage between immediate family members, but extended those prohibitions to certain aunts, uncles, and cousins who were regarded as like parents and siblings.<sup>21</sup>

Generally, these totems and taboos that were symbolic of certain animals and prohibitions/acts were instituted as deterrence. The animal totem which is the symbolic father of the clan must not be killed and eaten. It must be borne in mind that this comparative of the Oedipus and matrilineal complexes is to infer the departures in connotations, such as the father-son and son-avunculus conflicts. On the origins of prohibitions, Johnson and Price-Williams surmised from Freud that:

The clan originated in a crucial moment in prehistory when a group of brothers, who had conspired to kill their violent father and seize his women for themselves, experienced guilt and agreed furthermore to prohibit incest (via

marriages) [not seizures] and parricide (via totemism) [not acculturation].<sup>22</sup>

Although incest is taboo among the Abam, Amaseri and Ihechiowa, preferences tilt towards the matrilineage which neither rejects a child from a legitimate father or from a male consort and is legitimately adopted as either **Nwa enwogu nna nwo nne** (a child without a father has a mother, where the mother is the matrilineage who must take care of him/her) or **Nwa enwogu nne nwo nna** (a child without a mother has a father, where the father is the matrilineal uncle and must act as his/her guardian). While this matrilineal twist has moderating influence on intra-lineal relations, it is equally diversionary. The conflict, as mentioned earlier, is now between the son and avunculus (mother's brother) and not between son and father in a love-hate squabble for son's mother and father's wife. In spite of this deflect; it is clinically Oedipal in a matrilineal-type complex.

The matrilineal complex seemingly appropriates Freud's position when he said that:

Marriage rules that prevent fathers and sons from fighting over the women of their family group represent the first step from Nature to Culture: from animal to human. And the first cultural rules were just those that create the Oedipus complex: the boy must relinquish his early, primitive wishes to kill his father and marry his mother, in exchange for a stable nurturing family in which to grow, with the promise that one day he might have his own wife and be, in turn, protected from his son's wrath.<sup>23</sup>

Evolving into a double unilineal (patriliney and matrily) subcultural group with an obvious tilt to the matrilineal is line with Freud's

evolutionary concept: where the “stable human family and social group was an adaptive advance that began the human dominance of nature we observe today”<sup>24</sup> The matrilineal complex moderated father-son conflict and the usurpation of mother’s attention in a matrilineal phenomenon. The sons and daughters are losers in the Father-son-Uncle (avunculus) triangle. The sons, often are compelled to move towards their fathers in response to mother’s brothers (avunculus) aggression towards sons’ and sisters’ husbands. Tried as the matrilineal complex has, the residential pattern is prevalently patri-virilocal and has thriven because the sons develop a solidarity consciousness in identifying with their patrilineal origins and in revolt to the organized aggression of the avunculus (mother’s brothers) among the Abam, Amaseri and Ihechiowa. Among the Cross River Igbo, double unilineality has moderated:

Wanton sexual and aggressive behaviour in favour of impulse control [and enforced acceptance], mediated symbolically ... with the father present not only as a defender but also as a collaborator in acquiring and sharing food.<sup>25</sup>

In essence, the original concept of being descended from an eponymous ancestor has not been subordinated by the adoption of matriculture. The Abam, Amaseri and Ihechiowa live patrilocally as kinsmen, Umudi, who are half-brothers. But the matrilineal complex which has redireceted the Oedipus complex in the Cross River Igbo area: from a father-son context nexus mother/wife to a son-avunculus context nexus mother/wife. Consequently, the matrilineal ‘Oedipal’ complex has created ambivalence, uncertainty and contextual contests between paternity, maternity and inheritance.<sup>26</sup>

In some matrilineal communities in the Maghreb, such as the Tuareg, the “Electra complex” prevails in contradistinction to the Oedipus complex: that stipulates a son’s competition with the father for an exclusive marital/love relations with the mother; while the Electra complex is the

girl's attraction to her father and in competition with the mother for love and attention.<sup>27</sup>

Mothers among the Tuareg bequeath their property to not just their daughters but to the youngest. Regarding the matrilineal complex, the Electra complex inputs a relationship between brothers and sisters as a displacement of erotic attachments to parents; and is matrilineally Oedipal - the love between sisters and brothers, to the extent of owning joint estates and even willing to relinquish such to each other.

The survey undertaken so far has been to compare the matrilineal complex and the celebrated Oedipus complex. It has been found out that the Oedipus complex is synonymous with patrilineal/patriarchal societies. Attachments are son to mother in patriliney and brother to sister in matriliney. These discrepancies are highly significant. Inheritance of property and succession to power pass through the mother's side of the family, from mother's brother to sister's son. This is also dependent on the mother's brother's disposition to the son. According to Bronislaw Malinowsky:

The mother's brother is the appointed guardian of her and her family. Yet, this is a duty [traditionally imposed] which both weighs heavily upon him, and is not always grateful and pleasantly received by his wards.<sup>28</sup>

In Trobriand matrilineal societies as elsewhere, sexual passion flowed from brother to sister and not from son to mother. This feminine-Electra complex is not as destructive as the Oedipus complex. Rather, the institution of totems and taboos, and prohibitions, have precluded destructive impulses. Malinowsky cited a Trobriand tale of a brother and a sister who remained close throughout life as manifested in the sister-avunculus nexus among the Abam, Amaseri and Ihechiowa. In the Origin of Love and Magic is narrated about a girl:

Who accidentally falls under the spell of her brother's love magic [akin to matriliney] and pursues him into the shallows of the seashore, where they copulate repeatedly until they both die of shame.<sup>29</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

The matrilineal complex obviously predates patriliney and Freud's Oedipus theory is seemingly patriarchal-synonymous. Although the patriarchal/patrilineal appendage to the Oedipal complex is incongruent with the complex which compels every human child (feminine or masculine) to harbour incestuous and homicidal wishes. Removing from the love-hate Oedipal complex of Freud, of son versus father, Erich Fromm insisted it is rather a boy's legitimate rebellion against an oppressive father when he said that:

In as much as social and parental authority tend to break [a child's] will, spontaneity, and independence, the child, not being born to be broken, fight against the authority represented by his parents; he fights for his freedom not only from pressure, but also for his freedom to be himself, a full-fledged human being, not an automaton.<sup>30</sup>

Fromm insists further that the Oedipus complex was significantum of the transitory period in Greek history from matriarchy to patriarchy. In his summation, Fromm said:

The Oedipus complex has little to do with the mother at all: We arrive at the result that the complex centred around the boy's incestuous strivings toward his mother and [the] resulting hostility against the father is wrongly called an

Oedipus complex. There is a complex, however, which fully deserves to be called an Oedipus complex, the rebellion of the son against the pressure of the father's authority - an authority rooted in the patriarchal, authoritarian structure of society.<sup>31</sup>

Spiro surmises Malinowsky's Matrilineal complex aptly when he said that:

The matrilineal family comprises four important statuses - child, mother, mother's brother and father - the absence of a representative of one of the statuses, that of father, must surely be accounted as the most conspicuous structural feature of the [malinowsky's] myth....<sup>32</sup>

Transiting from matriliney to patriliney, Vladimir Propp argued that the earlier form of succession in ancient Greece was from king to his son-in-law (his sister's son in a matrilineal system) who married his daughter and consequently, although not in the acephalous communities of the Cross River Igbo area:

Under the matrilineal system the man who would be king simply married the princess; under the new (transitory) system, however, the hero did not marry the daughter, since the throne no longer passed through her line. Now the hero had to marry the king's widow, and hence kill the king first: When the king's daughter disappears, her role passes to the king's widow. Oedipus marries his mother. The

old role has been transferred to new characters created by changes in the social order.<sup>33</sup>

Contextualized to this thesis, the new characters are the avunculus, son, mother and father.

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