

# Melford E. Spiro

With a new preface by the author



## OEDIPUS IN THE TROBRIANDS



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# Oedipus in the Trobriands

**MELFORD E. SPIRO**

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*To the memory of A. Irving Hallowell*



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## *Preface*

This book is about the Oedipus complex. That yet another book should be added to the vast literature on this topic<sup>1</sup> testifies to its persistent claim on the interest of those who are concerned with understanding the human condition. I do not use that overworked expression lightly, for, as the controversies over the Oedipus complex indicate, what is at issue is the existence not merely of some passing episode in the psychological development of the child, but rather—if its proponents are correct—of a pivotal event in the human career which has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of society, culture, and human nature. Although the towering figure of Sigmund Freud initiated these controversies, the less prominent figure of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski has stood behind many of them ever since the publication of his work on the Trobriand Islands more than fifty years ago. Because of the influence of these two men, it is perhaps understandable that psychoanalysis and anthropology have been among the more active participants in these controversies over the last five decades.

For psychoanalysis the Oedipus complex is a cornerstone of its theory of personality formation, as well as the lens through which it observes many of the psychological dimensions of society, culture, and human nature. For anthropology, the discipline that has been singularly attentive to the cross-cultural diversity in human affairs, the Oedipus complex has been an example, par excellence, of the cultural relativity of human na-

1. A recent bibliography of the Oedipus legend, characterized by its compilers as "only a beginning," runs to ten pages (Edmunds and Ingber 1977).

ture (as well as the ethnocentric bias of Freudian theory), at least since the publication of Malinowski's classic *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. The evidence of that book, which argues that the Oedipus complex is absent in the Trobriand archipelago, is the cornerstone for the thesis propounded by relativists of all persuasions—anthropological and nonanthropological, Freudian as well as anti-Freudian—that the existence of the Oedipus complex (assuming that it might exist somewhere) is a product uniquely of Western institutions and, more particularly, of the Western "patriarchal" family structure.

This book challenges that thesis. On the basis of a reanalysis of Malinowski's data, it argues that if the existence of the Oedipus complex is culturally variable, the Trobriands, at least, do not constitute evidence for such a thesis. The argument comprises two parts. The first (and shorter) part—chapters 1 and 2—argues that there are no convincing grounds for Malinowski's contention that, in the Trobriands, the nuclear complex (as he calls it) consists of a psychological constellation in which the boy, unlike the case in the Oedipus complex, loves his sister and hates his mother's brother. Indeed, if the grounds that Malinowski had offered for the existence of the Trobriand *Kula*, for example, or for matriliney, had been of the same order as that which he advanced for the existence of the matrilineal complex (the term by which he refers to the psychological constellation comprising the Trobriand nuclear complex), it would have been rejected out of hand by all competent scholars.

The second (and larger) part of the argument (chapters 3–5) contends, pace Malinowski, that there are strong grounds for believing that the Oedipus complex comprises the nuclear complex in the Trobriands and that, moreover, both of its dimensions (love for the mother and hatred of the father) are if anything even stronger in the Trobriands than they are in the West. In pursuing this argument, I present the theoretical and empirical grounds for the development of this hypothesis and then test the hypothesis using two sets of predictions, one related to the determinants of the Oedipus complex, the other to its psychological concomitants. The final chapter discusses some wider implications of the Trobriand findings, particularly regarding

the long controversy concerning the universality of the Oedipus complex.

Although this book is about the Oedipus complex, it is also an exemplification of one mode of symbolic interpretation. Now "symbol," "symbolic meaning," "symbolic interpretation," and the like are enormously ambiguous expressions, conveying a wide range of meanings concerning which there is little consensus. As I shall employ the term, a symbol, like other signs, is an object or event which stands for or represents something else. Hence, not only is it the case that by cultural designation certain objects and events—the flag, for example, or the Lord's Supper—are stipulated to be symbols whose meanings are similarly stipulated, but also it is the case that objects or events that are not designated as symbols can also evoke symbolic meanings, both shared and idiosyncratic, in social actors. A president, for example, by psychological processes akin to the construction of metaphors, may be perceived as a father figure; hence, he may arouse feelings and reactions appropriate to a father.

Symbols, whether culturally designated or associatively constructed, may have unconscious as well as conscious meanings. Thus, the Madonna might unconsciously represent one's mother, just as a teacher might unconsciously represent one's father. Such unconscious symbolic representations are usually formed when beliefs and motives are too painful to remain in consciousness and, having been repressed, are then represented and gratified, respectively, by means of unconscious symbol formations.

Since an adult (unlike a child) Oedipus complex is, by definition, an unconscious psychological constellation, its existence can only be discovered insofar as it is represented in such unconscious symbolic formations. Hence, much of the evidence that is presented in support of the Trobriand Oedipal hypothesis consists of a wide range of cultural beliefs and social forms together with their putative unconscious symbolic meanings. These meanings, however, are derived neither from a symbolic code book nor yet again from any assumptions about the existence of universal unconscious symbols. Rather, they are derived initially from structural analyses of the cultural beliefs or from theoretically deduced predictions from the social forms, and they

are accepted only after they are tested by empirical procedures which are explained in a later chapter.

Though a solitary enterprise, scholarship is yet a cooperative one. In an important sense, the author of a book, one of this type at least, is merely the conduit for the channeling of many influences, both conscious and unconscious. To acknowledge by name all those whose influence is represented in this book—teachers and students, colleagues and informants, parents and children—would be a conceit, but to fail to mention some because one cannot possibly mention all would be equally egregious. In my case the most important single influence is that of A. Irving Hallowell, to whose memory this book is dedicated. It was his example that led to my interest in the interface between anthropology and psychoanalysis, and it was his guidance that directed my attention to both Malinowski and Freud.

More immediately, I am grateful to Edwin Hutchins, Benjamin Kilborne, Donald Kripke, Michael Meeker, Marc Swartz, and Donald Tuzin, whose criticisms of an earlier draft of this book provided the required incentive to improve its deficiencies. I am also indebted to Janet Loomis, Kae Knight, David Marlowe, Barbara Boyer, and Marian Payne who patiently typed and re-typed the many drafts of a manuscript which eventually became this book. In addition I wish to acknowledge the National Institute of Mental Health for its support of a comparative study of culturally constituted defense mechanisms, which (by a long and twisting intellectual route) led to the writing of this book.

## *Preface to the Transaction Edition*

Conceived as "the study of man," anthropology looks in two directions at once. On the one hand it attempts to document the range of diversity that characterizes the human career on this planet, and on the other hand it attempts to establish generalizations about that career. Hence, in one key ethnographic investigations attend to the particular, the peculiar, and the unique in every human society, and in another key they point to similarities, commonalities, and universals across societies. This creates a tension between "splitters" (those who stress ethnographic particulars and believe that most social and cultural generalizations are trivial) and "lumpers" (those who view the stress on particulars as trivial, and are concerned rather with what is generically human). This tension may be found within one and the same anthropologist, as well as among different anthropologists within one and the same era in the history of anthropology.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), one of the giants of anthropological history, seems to have transcended that tension. On the one hand Malinowski was one of the truly great ethnographers, recording in convincing detail and with enviable insight the major social institutions and cultural systems of the Trobriand islanders. Whether focusing on family and kinship, gardening and fishing, economic and ceremonial exchange, religion and magic, language and myth, or crime and law, virtually nothing regarding the culture and society of this tribal people of Northwest Melanesia escaped his attention, and little was opaque to his perceptive eye and empathic imagination.

On the other hand, Malinowski views Trobriand society and culture as a vehicle for understanding the generically human and for testing prevalent generalizations regarding the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of human experience. In the latter regard his most influential work is *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. Published in 1927, this book has as its target the psychoan-

alytic thesis that the Oedipus complex is a universal characteristic of human development.

Beginning with Freud, psychoanalytic theory has maintained that parents are not only the most important figures in the child's development, but they are also the objects of the child's strongest emotions. More particularly, this theory claims that everywhere young children develop strong libidinal feelings for the parent of the opposite sex, and that consequently, they develop strong aggressive feelings for the parent of the same sex whom they view as a competitor for the love of the former parent. In its starkest terms, the theory claims that the child wishes to sexually possess the opposite-sex parent and to kill the same-sex parent. Freud called this constellation of feelings the "Oedipus complex," after the tragic hero of the Greek myth (and the Sophoclean drama) who killed his father and married his mother.

Since typically the child not only hates, but also loves the parent of the same sex, and since he or she comes to recognize that it is both wrong and dangerous to sexually possess the parent of the same sex, one of the vital psychological tasks of childhood, according to psychoanalytic theory, is to cope with these conflictual feelings. Consequently, by middle childhood the Oedipus complex, so Freud argued, is either extinguished or repressed, that is, it is removed from conscious awareness. Whether it meets the one or the other fate, the residues of the Oedipus complex have an important influence, according to Freud, on personality development, and its reverberations are found in adult behavior, in the choice of a marriage partner, in the relationship to authority, in religion and myth, and in other aspects of culture.

Malinowski was one of the first anthropologists to develop an interest in, and to be influenced by psychoanalytic theory, and at the request of the British anthropologist C.G. Seligman he was stimulated to examine to what extent, if any, the Oedipus complex might be found in the Trobriands. Although he accepted the thesis that the Oedipus complex is a feature of child development in Western society, Malinowski (following Seligman) believed that the Trobrianders were an important test case for the psychoanalytic claim regarding its universality because, like some few other societies, their kinship system is matrilineal—that is descent is traced through the mother—and hence authority over the children is vested not in the father, but in the mother's brother. Malinowski called this system "mother-right," as opposed to the "father-right" system of Western society.

According to Malinowski these structural characteristics of Trobriand society, together with certain features of the parent-child relationship in the Trobriands, have a signal effect on the boys', but not the girls', psychological development. So far as girls are concerned, their "nuclear complex," as Malinowski called the psychological constellation of children regarding their emotionally significant adult figures, is more or less the same as Freud described it for the West. In short, Trobriand girls, according to Malinowski, develop an Oedipus complex. For boys, however, the nuclear complex is not an Oedipus complex, but rather, Malinowski reported, a "matrilineal complex." That is, rather than the mother, it is the sister who is the object of the boy's libidinal feelings, and rather than the father, it is the mother's brother who is the object of the boy's aggressive feelings.

Unlike many other exotic ethnographic reports that are soon forgotten or are else relegated to the category of anthropological curiosas (to be served up in introductory courses for the delectation of college freshmen), this report understandably enough has had a wide influence both within and much beyond anthropology. For many scholars *Sex and Repression* constituted proof either for the strong claim that psychoanalytic theory is false, or else for the weaker claim that one part of the theory, that regarding the Oedipus complex, is at best culture bound. It is the latter claim with which this book is concerned.

I first read *Sex and Repression* as a graduate student in the late 1940s, and like most anthropologists I viewed its findings as the definitive refutation of the universality of the Oedipus complex. Subsequently, I used its findings in my own lecture courses in cultural anthropology to demonstrate the causal influence of culture and social structure on personality development. Many years later, in connection with a seminar I offered on the incest taboo, I had occasion to reread this book and I discovered to my surprise (and chagrin) that Malinowski's argument was less convincing than I had remembered to be, and that its evidential basis was seriously flawed. That experience led me to read all of Malinowski's works related to the Trobriand family, kinship, sex, and social relations which, finally, led to the writing of this book which argues, *pace* Malinowski, that the male Oedipus complex is alive and well in the Trobriands.

*Oedipus in the Trobriands* represents an experiment in ethnographic writing in that the sequence of the chapters recapitulates, step by step, the research procedures by which I arrived at this

conclusion. Since I myself have not conducted research in the Trobriands—indeed, I have never visited these islands—my research data were limited to the ethnographic reports of Malinowski and those of a few other anthropologists (such as H. Powell and A. Weiner) who followed him. Hence, following a description of Freud's views regarding the male Oedipus complex, and following an examination of the data offered by Malinowski in support of his claim that Trobriand males develop a matrilineal complex (chapter 1), I conclude (chapter 2) that in fact this claim is not warranted by these data.

That the Trobrianders are not characterized by a matrilineal complex does not of course entail that they develop an Oedipus complex instead. That, however, they *might* develop such a psychological constellation—but not that they *do* develop one—was suggested by what appeared to be some curious data, both cultural and psychological, regarding the males' relationship to fathers and mothers. These data, which collectively I refer to as "The Absent Father" and "The Hidden Mother," are analyzed in chapter 3.

Because some reviewers of this book have misunderstood my intent, I wish to stress that this chapter does not argue that these data constitute evidence for the existence of an Oedipus complex in the Trobriands. It argues instead that they constitute "sufficient evidence to *seriously entertain the hypothesis* that an Oedipus complex exists in the Trobriands" (p. 45), and moreover that it is unusually strong. But a hypothesis is one thing, and its confirmation is another, and in chapters 4 and 5 I describe the procedures by which I attempted to test this hypothesis.

From Oedipal theory I deduced that certain characteristics of the family system might be expected to produce an unusually strong Oedipus complex in children. In addition, I also deduced from the theory that a particular set of psychological characteristics might be expected to be associated with a repressed Oedipus complex in adults. To test the Trobriand Oedipal hypothesis I formulated two sets of predictions, one set regarding the expected early parent-son relations in the Trobriands, the other regarding the expected psychological characteristics of Trobriand men. The confirmation of these predictions would them, so I argued, warrant the acceptance of the hypothesis, and their disconfirmation would warrant its rejection. As described in chapters 4 and 5, both sets of predictions were confirmed, from which I concluded that there are good grounds for accepting this hypothesis as highly probable.

Building on this conclusion, the last chapter—chapter 6—addresses the larger question of the universality of the Oedipus complex. Although the preceding chapters demonstrate that the Oedipus complex may exist not only in the West, but also in the Trobriands, that does not entail that the Oedipus complex is a universal phenomenon, as Freud assumed. Strictly speaking, the latter question can only be addressed by the study of a representative sample of human societies. Since such a study is not practicable, chapter 6 argues that there are strong theoretical grounds for assuming that the universality of the Oedipus complex is highly likely. This hypothesis, however, has still to be tested. It is to be hoped that the reissuance of *Oedipus in the Trobriands* will stimulate other anthropologists to undertake that task.



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# 1

## *The Problem Posed*

### Introduction

That the male Oedipus complex, even granting that it might exist somewhere, is a phenomenon restricted to Western-type societies is one of the most widely accepted generalizations in anthropology. Its wide acceptance is the singular achievement of Bronislaw Malinowski, who, as every (anthropological) schoolboy knows, demonstrated that the male Oedipus complex is not found in the Trobriands and, by extrapolation, in other societies whose family structures do not conform to that of the Western type.

With some few exceptions (Barnouw 1973: chapter 5; Fortes 1977; Gough 1953; Jones 1925; McDougall 1975; Róheim 1950) Malinowski's argument for existence of an alternative "nuclear complex" (as he calls it) in the Trobriands has convinced anthropologists and psychoanalysts alike. Thus, the Trobriand case is offered as disproof of the universality of the Oedipus complex not only in anthropology textbooks (Beals 1979:345; Ember and Ember 1973:322-23; Hoebel 1972:43; Honigsmann 1967:273-74; Kottak 1978:19; Richards 1972:228), but also in the work of psychological (Campbell and Naroll 1972:437-41; Rohner 1977:6-7) and psychoanalytic (Parsons 1969:1-14) anthropologists, as well as of classical (Fenichel 1945:97) and neo-Freudian (Kardiner 1939:chapter 3; Fromm 1949) psychoanalysts. This is all the more surprising since, in 1957, H. A. Powell, the first anthropologist to study the Trobriands following Malinowski's classic study, wrote a doctoral dissertation on Trobriand kinship in which *en*

*passant* he takes issue with Malinowski's thesis concerning the Oedipus complex. "The facts of the pattern of upbringing in the Trobriands," he observes in one passage, "are, so far as the development of the Oedipus complex is concerned, at least, no different from those of upbringing in any elementary family, whether under a patrilineal or a matrilineal kinship system" (Powell 1957:137). Again, in a later passage, he writes: "The Oedipus or any other type of complex is as likely to occur, and have the same basic form, in Trobrianders as in any other people" (Powell 1957:143).

That Powell's comments have been ignored by the scientific community in the quarter-century since he wrote his thesis may be attributed perhaps to two factors. In the first place his dissertation (to which I had access only after completing this manuscript) has not been widely available. But this cannot be a sufficient explanation for overlooking Powell's work, for his dissertation has long been known and referred to by Melanesian and kinship specialists, and for those who might not have been aware of its existence, he reiterated the same view in an article published some few years prior to the publication of the anthropology textbooks referred to above (Powell 1969, especially pp. 184-85). It can only be assumed, therefore, that a second reason for ignoring Powell's comments is the difficulty of rejecting a scientific tradition, especially if it is initiated (as this one was) by a highly influential scientific figure.

Like most other anthropologists trained in the post-Malinowski era, I too had accepted the Trobriand case as established truth until a few years ago when, for a seminar on the incest taboo, I assigned *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (Malinowski [1927] 1955) as one of the readings. Although I had read Malinowski's ethnographic monographs while a graduate student, I had not studied this work, the *locus classicus* of received anthropological opinion concerning the Oedipus complex, with special care. In studying this book for the seminar, however, it became increasingly apparent to me that its argument was seriously flawed and its data frustratingly thin. When a rereading of the relevant sections of *The Sexual Life of Savages* (Malinowski 1929) underscored these impressions, I was finally led to conclude that although the Oedipus complex may not be universal, the Trobriand case is a slim reed on which to base this judgment.

Malinowski was an outstanding anthropologist because he usually recognized an important problem, and having recognized it, he almost always formulated the relevant research question. The present case is no exception. Thus, in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (hereafter referred to as SR) he put the problem which concerns us here squarely: "Do the conflicts, passions and attachments within the family vary with its constitution, or do they remain the same throughout humanity?" (SR:19). Having stated the problem, he proceeded to formulate the research question which (rare for his day) he put in the form of a testable hypothesis: "If they vary, as in fact they do, then the nuclear complex of the family cannot remain constant in all human races and people; it must vary with the constitution of the family." This being so, the Oedipus complex (so he argued) is only one type of nuclear complex, viz., that type which "corresponds essentially to [our] patrilineal Aryan family with the developed *patria potestas*, buttressed by Roman law and Christian morals, and accentuated by the modern economic conditions of the well-to-do bourgeoisie" (SR:20). In the Trobriands, on the other hand, in which descent is matrilineal, jural authority is vested in the mother's brother, the father (who is not even taken as genitor) is kindly and nurturant, and children are allowed free expression of their sexual impulses, another type of nuclear complex is found. Although the boys' motives in both complexes are the same, their targets, to quote Malinowski's famous formulation, are different: "In the Oedipus complex there is the repressed desire to kill the father and marry the mother, while in the matrilineal society of the Trobriands the wish is to marry the sister and to kill the maternal uncle (SR:76).

Before proceeding to a detailed examination of Malinowski's thesis, it is perhaps desirable to briefly summarize the contours of the Oedipus complex. This summary will address not only those dimensions that were addressed by Malinowski, but some others as well that Malinowski did not address and whose neglect perhaps led him to ignore certain manifestations of the Trobriand Oedipus complex which he might otherwise have perceived. At the same time, however, it will deal primarily with Freud's description of this psychological constellation since it is Freud's paradigm with which Malinowski is concerned. Moreover, the summary will be confined to the boy's Oedipus com-