African Tragedy

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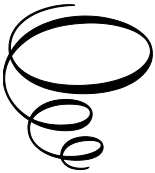
A Novel by Wulf Sachs

Edited and Introduced by

Laurence Wright

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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To Madeleine
with grateful thanks

Give me the man that with undaunted spirit
Dares give occasion of a Tragedie

—Anthony Copley, *A Fig for Fortune*, 1596

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INTRODUCTION

WULF SACHS'S *AFRICAN TRAGEDY*: ANATOMY OF AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NOVEL

The manuscript of *African Tragedy* has lain virtually unnoticed in the Witwatersrand University archives since its purchase in c.1944 as item No. 684 of the "Hoernle sale". Sub-titled "*the life story of a native doctor"*, with "Draft" written on its spine, the significance of *African Tragedy* has been upstaged historically by two published versions based on the same material, *Black Hamlet* (1937) and *Black Anger* (1947). The Wits manuscript has generally been regarded simply as an *ur*-version of the later works, and subsequently ignored.[1]

To discuss these other books without *African Tragedy* is like trying to erect a building starting with floors two and three. The foundation has been omitted. Relations between the three works are complex and revelatory. Once these have been understood, *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger* can never be read as once they were.

Matters are further complicated by the discovery, made during research for this publication, of a fourth version of *Black Hamlet*, very different, this time a play destined for Broadway written in collaboration with Wulf Sachs by the tough Hollywood screenwriter John Bright. The script was registered in the Library of Congress for copyright purposes on 6 May 1949, the year of Sachs's death, and there is no trace of it having been read, studied or performed. *Black Hamlet*, *The Play*, is available in a companion volume (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025) which moves

[1] While several writers note the existence of *African Tragedy*, the only substantial treatment to date has been Adam Sitze's study of the limitations of natural justice, psychoanalysis and law, "Treating Life Literally", which examines Sachs's interpretation of the real-world trial upon which that of the fictional character "Mdlawini" is based (*Law and Critique* 18, 2007). Ten years later, Lotte Kößler's "The White Man's Justice" in *Postcolonial Justice* (Brill, 2017) also made some use of *African Tragedy.*

the *Black Hamlet* story deep into the political sensibility of 1940s America.[2] At the time, the legacy of the Haarlem Renaissance and the burgeoning American civil rights ferment made African and South African political connections particularly cogent and eloquent, an important strand in the "Black Atlantic" movement. However, none of this, the two published books and the newly discovered play, makes historical or imaginative sense unless efforts are made to understand the origins and import of the founding text, the novel *African Tragedy.*

The work contains large stretches of prose incorporated in the later published versions, but *African Tragedy* is distinctive, differing from its successors both in intent and realised meaning. Recording more than just a shift in narrative situation, the later texts inscribe a radically different attitude towards their subject matter, revising what the author had originally set himself to do. Grasping the singularity of *African Tragedy* directly, illuminates the character of Sachs's later publications, including the import of Bright's play. As a first iteration, *African Tragedy* expresses freely and uninhibitedly what its author initially wanted to say, before adverse critique and reflection supervened.

Starting from a descriptive ethnographic base, pitched to illustrate the (suppositional) universality of Freudian psychoanalysis, Sachs sets out to describe and understand the plight of a rural African *nganga* (roughly, herbalist, diviner and spiritual healer) struggling to survive in the inhospitable political and social climate of industrialising South Africa of the 1930s, seeking a sense of "home" amidst a complex net of increasingly oppressive legislation designed to expunge black Africans from white society while still exploiting their cheap labour. The probable source of the formative critique which stifled any initial bid for publication, resulting instead in the swerve to *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger*, is discussed below. As far as is known, the manuscript was never submitted to a publisher.

Black Hamlet and *Black Anger* have rightly engendered substantial scholarly attention and debate from very different perspectives. Narrative interest aside, all three works (and now the play):

- constitute pioneering efforts by a Freudian psychoanalyst to disseminate findings regarding the turbulent inner psychic life of rural Africans confronting urbanisation. (Prior to the publication of *African Tragedy, Black Hamlet* was the very first such study.)

[2] The play's origins and history are discussed in the Introduction to the edited play (2025), and earlier in Wright (2021) and Wright (2022). Undoubtedly crafted by Bright, the play reflects close collaboration between Bright and Sachs.

- directly probe tensions between indigenous African therapies and colonial psychiatry, energising historical debate concerning the universality of Freudian psychoanalysis, which at the time was a wholly novel interpretation of human life, galvanising intellectuals across the globe.
- present valuable evidence concerning a particular white liberal/socialist response to chaotic black urbanisation, suffering and racist injustice in industrialising Johannesburg in the early twentieth century.
- deploy salient synergies shared by anti-antisemitism, antiracism and anticolonialism in their opposition to South Africa's seemingly ineluctable march towards grand apartheid.
- present a unique perspective on the state of black resistance and mushrooming modern political organisation immediately prior to the implementation of the suffocating Nationalist hegemony.
- offer important testimony to efforts by emergent local and international anthropological scholarship, rooted in "contact theory", to understand the tortured resilience of traditional African cultures reacting to the modernising upheaval experienced in a racist society.
- dramatise tangentially but poignantly the "insider-outsider" story of white Jewish immigrants to South Africa, fleeing authoritarian oppression in Eastern Europe only to find that the society in which they hope to find their new home is riddled with a comparable political virus, growing in influence.
- overtly illustrate the cruel contest between a sense of natural justice and the rigours of supposedly universal institutional law rooted in the Enlightenment, as practised by the South African State, in a society infused with traditional belief systems dating back hundreds, if not thousands of years.

Freighted with this complexity, a burden this introduction can do no more than skim, *African Tragedy*, *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger* must be among the most insightful, difficult and disturbing literary productions of South Africa's mid-twentieth century. The books are thoroughly controversial. As pioneering attempts to probe the psychic life of an African in literature–a distinctly modernist enterprise–in today's intellectual currency they are almost guaranteed to grate as well as enthral, no matter the positionality from which they are assessed and interpreted. Idiosyncratically symptomatic, they are far in advance and fundamentally unlike anything else from their time and place, and therefore an irreplaceable component of

the South African colonial archive. Scholarly accounts of *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger* have to date succeeded in synthesising only a fraction of their emotional impact and historical significance.

And now we add *African Tragedy*, which expresses the emotional, social and political matrix from which the later books emerged, free from the constrained, more pedantic ideological channelling which influenced them. More than a "first draft", here is what Sachs initially wanted to say before academic probity intruded to reshape the undertaking. We can surmise that the later published works were re-written in response to pungent critique which Sachs evidently accepted and acted on. By comparing *African Tragedy* with the later texts we can deduce the character of this critique. We can also speculate with some assurance as to its source.

It becomes important to recognise that Sachs had little reason to suppose that the draft of *African Tragedy* would ever come to light. Indeed, *African Tragedy* aside, Sachs's manuscript *Nachlaß* is miniscule, amounting to little more than random letters in disparate archives.[3] As far as Sachs's reading public was concerned *African Tragedy* did not exist. He could rest comfortably in the assumption that everything it was possible for the public to know about his "hero", the Manyikan *nganga* called John Chawafambira, was to be found in the two books he had published.[4] Of the notes and working papers that must have gone into the making of *African Tragedy* and its successor titles, he left no trace. It is perfectly understandable that psychoanalytic case notes would have been destroyed, but what about working drafts, lecture notes, article proofs–or detritus from his editorship of the pioneering socialist review *The Democrat*? Apart from the Wits ms, nothing remains that could help piece together the novel's genesis. The manuscript that has come down to us was out of his hands, and its guardians-by-default, Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé, were not disposed to encourage publication, by Sachs or anyone else. The Hoernlés (he was a Professor of philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, she an inspirational lecturer in anthropology at the same institution) were leading lights in a lively discussion group of young academic anthropologists who happened

[3] Notably Sachs to Freud, 1 August 1939, Freud Museum, London (MOS 78-9). We are better off for correspondence received, especially letters from Freud to Sachs in the Library of Congress: 14 March 1930; 7 March 1932; 26 Oct 1932; 26 Dec 1932; 2 April 1933; 9 Dec 1933.

[4] The name is spelt "Chavafambira" in *Black Hamlet* (BH) and *Black Anger* (BA). Chawafambira, used in *African Tragedy,* is the more usual *chiShona* orthography.

also to be fascinated by Freudianism, of which Wulf Sachs was the leading, in fact the only, South African exponent.[5]

Relations between the two texts already published are easily captured in bald outline. The reception of *Black Hamlet* (1937), published in Britain, was substantially influenced by its loaded subtitle, *"The Mind of an African Negro Revealed by Psychoanalysis"*, placing Freudian psychotherapy front and centre. The use of the term "Negro", less offensive then than it would be now, already points the book towards the United States. *Black Anger* (1947), published exclusively in the United States with no sub-title, re-orientates the work to engage the gathering momentum of the American civil rights movement, exemplifying a telling shift of emphasis from psychology to politics, and highlighting recovery of political agency by the oppressed. The terrain thus covered straddles two major intellectual cleavages which have left their mark world-wide, one psychosocial, the other sociopolitical. The impact of industrialisation and urbanisation on traditional societies (the modernisation problem) finds its counterpart in the contestation between psychology, anthropology, and politics as modes of interpreting this very problem. In *African Tragedy* the two questions run side-by-side: Is Freudian psychoanalysis a universal science? What are the inevitable effects of urbanisation on rural Africans under South Africa's racist dispensation? The richness and complexity of the text ultimately stem from the fact that Sachs himself is unsure of how these two questions relate to each other. He doesn't start with answers, he starts from a person, the Manyikan *nganga* John Chawafambira, whose experiences he hopes will illuminate and clarify the issues. In consequence, *African Tragedy* bears a more modest subtitle, *"The life story of a native doctor"*, suggesting that readers are in for some form of narrative biography.

Literary Context

African Tragedy belongs as fully to the history of the South African non-fiction novel as it does to psychoanalytic biography, where its successors *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger* have traditionally been placed. Where the two later works adumbrate "solutions", the one psychological, the other primarily socio-political, *African Tragedy* is bent on exploring

[5] Ellen Hellman, the young anthropologist who introduced Sachs to Chawafambira in 1931 was one of the group. She wrote succinctly about him in her masters dissertation and published two summative articles in *Bantu Studies* and *Africa* (both in 1935); but the dissertation itself, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Survey of an Urban Native Slum Yard*, appeared only in 1948, a year before Sachs's death.

intractable problems in all their raw complexity, feeling the issues, exposing the hurts and confusions, any prescripts tentative and consciously inadequate. At the conclusion of the story, despite some brave analytic forays interpellated *en route*, both narrator and reader remain overawed and intimidated by the power and recalcitrance of the dilemmas encountered. Appropriately, then, the work's title assigns it to the ancient genre of tragedy, succinctly defined by Isaiah Berlin as "the fatal collision of values that cannot be reconciled" (2003, 23). It is Sachs's searing commitment to confronting this intractability head-on that lends *African Tragedy* its emotional bite, perhaps more so than the later books where hurt is softened by anticipated psychological and socio-political solutions.

The arc traced through the three works, taken together, reflects Sachs's growing confidence in black political agency, in the ability of Africans to surmount the challenges of modernity, perhaps mirroring aspects of his own political awakening as much as any psychic changes he sees in John Chawafambira. Still to come was John Bright's dramatisation of *Black Hamlet*, a radical theatrical wish-fulfilment envisioning a future where the burden of apartheid (which had not even formally come into being when Bright wrote) has been lifted from South Africa and replaced by greater social justice.

To appreciate these later developments it is imperative to start at the beginning of the story, with *African Tragedy.* Much of the existing Sachs scholarship is skewed because unavoidably unresponsive to the complex and problematic nature of the founding text.

This first attempt to portray the story of John Chawafambira is much closer to novelised life-history than to psychoanalytic biography, though clearly Sachs accepts Freudianism as a master narrative, the key to all mythologies. In fact, if the *ur*-text is properly a novel, even if of a peculiar kind, it should be noted that *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger* were also regularly referred to as novels by people who had known Sachs personally. In his tribute to Sachs after the latter's untimely death in 1949, aged only 56, the South African poet and author Edgar Bernstein refers repeatedly to *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger* as Sachs's "novel", calling the two works "the best South African novel on the non-European theme" (1949,16). The two men collaborated closely on Sachs's fortnightly socialist review, *The Democrat*, and it seems likely that Bernstein's use of the term derives from conversations with the author. The announcement of Sachs's death in the *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, lauds him as "the author of many psychological works and a novel, Black Hamlet" (26 June 1949). Similarly, the astute critic Dora Taylor, author of the influential piece *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (1952) under the pseudonym Nosipho Majeke,

when she came to write about *Black Hamlet* in 1942 remarks that "the psychoanalytical method of gathering the material matters little and the result is an enthralling narrative of the primitive African's contact with European civilisation" (2002, 62). Accordingly, she groups *Black Hamlet* with other novels of the 1930s which treat the plight of Africans confronting colonisation, among them Leonard Barnes's *Paraclete* (1935), Frank Brownlee's *Ntsukumbini* (1929), Ethelreda Lewis's *Wild Deer* (1934), Laurens van der Post's *In a Province* (1934), and *I am Black: The Story of Shabala* by J. Grenfell Williams and Henry John May (1936). This move by Taylor is important, given the tendency of present-day readers to regard the work as a stand-alone oddity, a freakish cross-cultural foray into South African psychoanalytic biography.

African Tragedy can rightfully lay claim to a place in the history of the South African novel although, as a psychic probe embedded in social narrative, the book's intent remains distinctive. Rather than consciously seeking to add to the novelistic tradition indicated by Taylor, it is likely that Sachs was indirectly inspired by two industrious authors in his immediate circle. One provocation came from the doyen of South African colonial anthropologists, the elderly Swiss missionary H-A. Junod, whom Sachs would have known as a fellow member of the Institute of Race Relations. In prolonged research for *The Life of a South African Tribe* (1912), his magisterial account of the Tsonga peoples, Junod came to a point where he felt moved to offer a more subjective rendering of their predicament. He wanted to convey his personal concern for the wellbeing of those he was describing with detached objectivity in his *magnum opus*, so he used fiction to try and get beneath the skin of the Tsonga and show, feelingly, their subjective plight at the turn of the C19. The result was his novel *Zidji* (1911). Equally cogent for Sachs would have been the work of the Rev. Ray E. Phillips, the man behind the Bantu Men's Social Centre and who had been intimately involved in founding the Institute of Race Relations, two of the institutions integral to the world Sachs is describing. A Congregational Minister from the United States, Phillips was engaged in research for his book *The Bantu in the City: A Study of Cultural Adjustment on the Witwatersrand,* published in 1938, a year after *Black Hamlet.* This was a more detailed follow-up to his earlier book, *The Bantu Are Coming: Phases of South Africa's Race Problem* (1930). The adjacent examples of Junod and Phillips would have been important signposts for Sachs.

There is little evidence that Sachs placed his own writing within the growing body of South African imaginative literature critical of the country's racial dispensation. The fact that *African Tragedy* grew at least in part from his acquaintance with John Chawafambira, a singular individual,

together with the book's intentional focus on Freudianism would in his eyes have marked it out as something different. Nevertheless, it seems important to acknowledge the work as a significant contribution to a much broader effort by concerned South African writers to understand what was happening to Africans in the modernising and racially conflicted South Africa of the 1930s. Looking beyond writing in English, and further back than the 30s, Adam Sitze sets Sachs's work within the longstanding "Jim goes to Joburg" topos, listing Douglas Blackburn's *Leaven: A Black and White Story* (1908), Enoch Guma's *U-Nomalizo* (1918), W. C. Scully's *Daniel Venanda: The Life Story of a Human Being* (1923), and Henry Ndawo's *U-Nolishwa* (1931), as well as Van der Post's *In A Province*, as exemplifying the theme (Sitze 51, n.26).[6] He also notes R.R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1928), the short "sin-in-the-city" novella the title of which is so similar to that which Sachs was to use for his own novel. Rolfes Dhlomo was the elder brother of H.I.E. Dhlomo, whose work Sachs published occasionally in *The Democrat*, and who features prominently in all three Sachs texts as the character Tembu.

African Tragedy was one among many comparable and complementary literary efforts to describe South Africa's urban scene from the perspective of rural migrants. The text is much more than a psychoanalytic sport. It has value as an historic text documenting the black working-class urban malaise developing in the City of Johannesburg at this period, an awful prelude anticipating even more draconian political "remedies" soon to be imposed under the auspices of so-called grand apartheid.

From enlargement of social scale to Freudian universalism: A symbolic journey

The "Jim goes to Jo'burg" theme traverses more than geography. It touches history, technology, social elasticity and its limits, ethnic and sexual intersectionality, family cohesion, law, social organisation, economics, industrialisation, migrant labour, ethics and politics–in short, the full range of human interaction, change and development in this particular context. Sachs depicts the contours of this journey as the essence of *African Tragedy*.

The social anthropologist Monica Hunter (Wilson), exploring "contact theory" in the rural eastern Cape as a complement to the essentially

[6] The list of novels derives from Michael Chapman's *Southern African Literature* (1996). "Jim Comes to Joburg" (1949), also known as *African Jim*, was the title of South Africa's first feature-length film with an all-African cast, directed by Donald Swanson and featuring Daniel Adnewmah and Dolly Rathebe.

urban purview of Winifred Hoernlé's Johannesburg circle, suggested that enlargement of social scale inevitably delivers a marked and troubling expansion of intellectual, political and religious outlook (see Godfrey and Monica Wilson 1947; Monica Wilson 1971). While basic religious conceptions are widely shared across southern Africa, local spiritual experience typically stems from prolonged and close social interaction among members of an ethnic grouping within a set physical environment. Spatial separation inhibits any wider cultural interaction, so that each group fosters its spiritual convictions in a particular bounded locale. An obvious example from *African Tragedy* would be John's deep reverence for the split granite monolith or "dwala" marking the grave of his grandfather, the great *nganga* Gwerere, near his home in the former Southern Rhodesia.

Long distance travel and trade disrupts this unconscious metaphysical attachment to local topography, multiplies social perspectives, and opens fresh receptivity to universalisms such as those proclaimed by world religions like Islam and Christianity. At one level John's story simply concerns a disturbing move away from his place of origin: in Sachs's words, the tale of "his plunge into an unknown world" and "his return as a sophisticated and disillusioned failure" (Bk 4 Ch 4).

This protracted journey entails bruising encounters with different aspects of racialised modernity. Localised belief systems have somehow to coexist with large-scale religions, novel media presences and international (western) medical, legal, and commercial practices, or else forge fresh syntheses combining elements of them all. Enlargement of scale involves not just geographical or temporal psychic displacement, the mental or physical imbalance attributed by Avtah Brah to "separation from homeland, family, kinship…due to political upheaval, mass migration, natural disaster or personal crisis" (1996, 146). It is all of this, but includes much more– namely, involuntary translation to an ostensibly unbounded cultural and psychic sphere, already fully occupied (preoccupied) by alien and eclectic forms of behaviour, activity and knowledge; a sphere which implicitly denies the adequacy of one's own beliefs and behaviours.

Tribal authority is diluted: witness John's failure in his new surroundings to honour his *midzimu* (ancestral spirits). On top of this, the standardised western schooling introduced by the colonial state removes people mentally from the sole authority of parents and tribal elders, further impairing social cohesion. When eventually he returns home, John not only finds it difficult to conform, he finds the atmosphere stifling:

> Only with men travelled like himself, could he converse. He found the outlook of the stay-at-homes unbelievably narrow, restricted and intolerant. (Bk 4 Ch 2)

Following a trying sojourn across the South African border with an unorthodox multi-ethnic clan (a sure indication of enlarging social scale) in the Northern Transvaal, John's outward journey takes him to a hotel in Pietersburg (now Polokwane) where he works as a waiter. In this more formal economy he learns freshly his racial precarity under state law, even when guiltless. The neurotic fragility of an elderly white woman, imagining with little provocation that John has violated her, illustrates unmistakeably the black man's vulnerability to unfair treatment. Fleeing Pietersburg by train with Maggie his partner to evade possible conviction and imprisonment, he reaches Johannesburg's Park Station in a chapter entitled "The Boiling Pot". The train disgorges the pair into a frantic urban melee:

> Only a small portion of the long, wide platform was for non-Europeans, so they were all crushed together. John in a neat grey suit and black fez, carrying a heavy box in his right hand, was left behind the crowd…On his right a small, wizened, yellow-skinned Hottentot, still clutching his tall shepherd's staff, clad in a ragged miscellany, swore competently and softly in Afrikaans. In front a huge, copper-skinned Pondo, his crimson and black blanket worn with an insolent air, made an effective passage through the packed crowd; while behind John, a thick-set Zulu in white tunic and shorts, trimmed with scarlet braid, rammed his bundle in the small of John's back. John made an attempt to push himself through the crowd behind the blanketed Pondo, but was held up by a compact group of half a dozen women, their hair dressed fantastically; their bodies draped in brown woollen garments, bead-embroidered; a dozen copper necklets sheathing their throats, bracelets of copper and beads round their legs and arms. A native policeman, in navy-blue uniform and hat turned up at the side, did his best to push through a dozen Shangaan boys, their loins girt with brightly patterned cotton cloths, the torso nude, or covered by a discarded waistcoat. A disgruntled Indian hawker, tried to keep abreast of the native boy who carried his wooden box by a leather thong over the shoulder.
>
> There was a medley of tongues, Sesutu, Zulu, Xosa, Afrikaans, English, and more besides. Sophisticated town natives born and bred in Johannesburg pressed along the narrow passage side by side, cheek by jowl, with men and women from Portuguese East Africa, country folk, dazed and bewildered by the strangers and magnitude and numbers.
>
> John felt that never had he been so alone as now, pressed and thrust and jostled by this crowd of people. (Bk2 Ch1)

This ethnic and linguistic hodgepodge is John's introduction to a hostile large-scale setting wholly unfitted, unprepared and unwilling to accommodate people such as he and Maggie–the thrusting young industrial and mining city of Johannesburg. The "boiling pot" is stirred and agitated by the

impacts of industrial modernity and a racially skewed legal dispensation, which penetrates the lives of urban newcomers unpredictably and in disturbing ways. Eventually the two find a place to stay in the soon-to-be-demolished Doornfontein slum known as Rooiyard (in Afrikaans, Red Yard), close by the city centre and near where many immigrant Jewish communities had also settled. Sachs's consulting rooms, "ten minutes' walking distance of his yard" (*Black Hamlet* 1996, 74), were in the modern, newly constructed high-rise Pasteur Chambers in nearby Jeppe Street.

The contiguity is significant. A strand of language in the novel repeatedly draws the reader's attention to hurts and abrasions suffered by refugees exiled from their homelands (in Sachs's case, Czarist Russia), hurts which match the oppressive treatment endured by Africans in South Africa. For instance, the Jewish hotelier in Pietersburg who befriends John empathises from his own residual anxiety: "Fear of the police remained in him as a legacy from old Czarist Russia. He had left his own country because he could not stand the persecution of the government and the police" (Bk1 Ch5). Sachs clearly wants his readers to recognise a shared *weltschmerz*, what Freud referred to as *Nachträglichkeit* (roughly, belated trauma-response), at the root of his impulsion in trying to understand and assist John (and Maggie) in their adjustment to a wholly new way of life (Freud 1895).

Rooiyard forms the background to John's early struggles to rethink himself, build his career and family, and discover a *modus vivendi* in this new large-scale urban environment. The slum yards acted as informal reception centres, half-way houses, where rural newcomers struggled with the challenge of either staying in the city or returning to their points of origin. The shifting populations feel strong pulls in both directions. As historian Timothy Moldram puts it, "Urban slum yards of the 1930s seem to represent a transitional stage between rural consciousness and 'urban' values" (1997, 156), an alienating setting in which to first encounter global modernity.[7]

The Freudian paradigm

Change of scale is only one significant lens through which to view John's story. The most important perspective for appreciating the design of the novel is Sachs's settled conviction that Freudianism, the emergent master narrative of the age, provides a revelatory analytical interpretation

[7] Philip Mayer's *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (1963), based on research in the East London township of Mdantsane, showed how an urban township could also function as a bastion of rural traditionalism rather than a bridge to modernity.

of John's predicament. Here it is not the supposed therapeutic efficacy of psychoanalysis that compels Sachs's allegiance–that is merely implied–but rather its claim to be a fresh key to the interpretation of human nature, offering salient insights capable of bridging the temporal, historical and geographical *hiatus* which change of scale has traced, the predicament which leaves John adrift and rudderless in Johannesburg. Sachs's underlying belief in Freudianism informs a vision which decisively unites tradition and modernity across all barriers of history, technology and culture.

For Sachs, Freudian psychoanalysis assumes a crowning place in the evolution of human understanding, seeming to answer deep-lying cultural questions intrinsic to the historical development of society, particularly as recounted in the young discipline of social anthropology. Recapitulating anthropology's development before Freud in short compass would be tricky. Before reaching the solid ground of social anthropology's founding fathers, Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and, somewhat later, Evans-Pritchard, the back history would sprawl through Kant, Hegel, Herder and Rousseau, Comte and Condorcet, Darwin and Lyell, sociologists like Saint-Simon and Durkheim, Marx and Engels, and so many others. It is nevertheless important to recognise that all through *African Tragedy*, in addition to Freud, we encounter echoes of the early history of anthropology, sounding not as stale academic perspectives, but as valid contributary insights throwing light on John's predicament.

Sachs makes serious efforts to situate and parallel his own western medical outlook, precepts and practices with those of his *nganga* in a uniform ethical and therapeutic purview. They are both "professionals". We are familiar with today's efforts to claim equivalence for various folk ethnopsychiatries ranged alongside western psychotherapies, treating them as different but cogent approaches to phenomena of mental distress and forms of madness (for example Gaines 1992). While rooted in specific cultures, these therapeutic modalities nevertheless challenge western medical and psychological claims to being universally and uniquely scientific. In recognising the challenge Sachs was substantially in advance of his time. He was asking cogent questions.

Such openness to cultural equivalence is in line with much early anthropological thought of the kind quoted by his advocate in Mdlawini's trial: "He supported his thesis with pronouncements of famous students of primitive mentality…'To the primitive African, the belief in the supernatural is just as real, logical and valuable as to us the theories of Darwin or Einstein'" (Bk3 Ch6). Mdlawini's advocate, ventriloquising Sachs's own views, takes Tylor's influential formulation of "animism"–the

idea of all-pervasive life and will in nature–to be fundamental in all "primitive" belief systems:

> According to his outlook, everything in nature is active, is animate, and can suddenly and capriciously turn hostile towards him. Consequently he lives in constant fear, and turns automatically to the one compensation vouchsafed to such people, to the witchdoctors, in whom he places unconditional belief and trust. (Bk3 Ch6)

Both Tylor and Sachs regard this belief as mistaken, but not irrational. Indeed, Tylor's epochal work *Primitive Culture* (1871) practically obliterates distinctions between the so-called "civilised" and "primitive" mind. In a similar fashion, passages in *African Tragedy* echo James Frazer's notion from *The Golden Bough* (1890) that the character of human thought is fundamentally homogeneous, implying that the tribal herbalist or "medicine man" (such as John Chawafambira), in practising his traditional remedies and magic rites, differs in principle not at all from the modern physician in his plush chambers equipped with the latest scientific equipment. Frazer writes:

> The magician does not doubt that the same causes will always produce the same effects, that the performance of the proper ceremony accompanied by the appropriate spell, will inevitably be attended by the desired results.…Thus the analogy between the magical and the scientific conceptions of the world is close. (*Golden Bough* 1935, 220)

In *African Tragedy* Sachs commits himself to testing such views. When John is finally inducted as *nganga*, following lengthy invocations to the *midzimu* Sachs quips: "So the newly qualified medical practitioners of other races spin out the list of toasts" (Bk4 Ch4). But, paradoxically, he also responds positively to the rebarbative notion, definitively articulated by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in *How Natives Think* (1910), that the "primitive" mind is indeed utterly different, not logical and quasi-scientific at all but pre-logical and mystic. For Lévy-Bruhl, primitive people are unable to distinguish between reality and the supernatural, and the sophisticated mental processes ascribed to "primitives" by Tylor and Frazer simply do not occur. In several markedly Lévy-Bruhl-like moments, we find Sachs categorically denying Africans' powers of reflective analysis, of foresight, or of accurately appreciating cause and effect:

> For in spite of his long contact with civilisation, John still had no idea of cause and effect; did not understand people; could not analyse a situation, or foresee the development of events. (Bk3 Ch2)

It was not until 1937 (the date of *Black Hamlet*'s publication) that Evans-Pritchard definitively countered the assertions of Lévy-Bruhl in his published fieldwork on the Azande people of Central Africa, by demonstrating their situated rationality.[8]

In attempting the story (or at least "a" story) of John Chawafambira, Sachs sets out to explicate questions surrounding the transition from rural life in 1930s Manyikaland to the predicaments faced by rural immigrants in industrialising Johannesburg. His guiding assumption, in fact the book's dominant thesis, informed by his researches in the Pretoria Mental Hospital in the 1920s, is that Africa and Europe share a uniform humanity, because Africans and Europeans are psychologically indistinguishable (Sachs 1933). Cultures may differ, psychology does not.

Sachs's admirable presumption, remarkable for the time, runs into difficulty in respect of two particular *cultural* matters: recognition of "cause and effect" (noted above), and allied arguments stemming from the indubitability of immediate physical sensation, especially pain. These two issues, both arguably typical of post-Enlightenment European thought, puncture his efforts to assert complete psychological uniformity and equivalence between Africa and Europe, reigning undisturbed across history and geography. Tensions between Lévy-Bruhl, and Tylor and Frazer, noted above, were very much alive for Sachs. Taken together, they form the touchstones for his recognition of a subversive difference between Western European and "African" *mentalitiés.*

According to Sachs the difference lies in an inability to step back from the totality of individual experience in order to abstract and isolate the conceptual essence of cause and effect in a particular instance, and consequently, an inability to separate that instance from the circumambient human predicament. In his categorisation of human modes of thought, Ernst Cassirer describes exactly this inability as typical of what he calls mythical thinking:

> Because myth lacks the form of causal analysis, it cannot know the sharp dividing line which only this form of thought creates between the whole and its parts…The whole and its parts are interwoven, their destinies are linked…and so they remain even after they have been detached from one another in pure fact. Even after such separation the fate of the part hangs over the whole as well. (Cassirer *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Vol. 2, 51)

[8] The conjuncture is sensitively explored by Andreas Heinz (1997).

The issue comes to a head in the trial of Mdlawini, a young man indicted for killing an incidental character, David Mohali, mistaking him for a malevolent *tacati* (witch) bent on his personal destruction. The case is sensational: "Murder through witchcraft committed in the heart of civilisation" (Bk2 Ch5), the word "civilisation" used here with some irony. The seeds of Mdlawini's misapprehension have been sown unwittingly by none other than John Chawafambira in his role as *nganga*. The resulting act brings about the death of a human being. But of what is Mdlawini guilty and how should he be punished? Should the law wilfully deny the validity of a culturally coded state of mind and condemn him outright, perhaps mitigate his guilt, or even exonerate him? Dennis Lloyd explains the legal issues at stake in such instances:

> …people know in a general way what they mean when they talk about killing and they can distinguish easily enough between accidental and intentional killing. The law, on the other hand, needs to conceptualize these and other related ideas much more precisely before it can operate a system of criminal law in a rational and systematic way. It needs to define very precisely the exact classes of acts that are unlawful; the precise states of mind which need to be established to render these acts criminally punishable as murder; the sorts of defences which may be available to an accused, including insanity or other mental defects; and what may be the effect of particular defences as either exonerating the accused completely or merely diminishing the gravity of the offence… (*The Idea of Law* 290-91)

The ensuing judgment turns on the notion of what the *reasonable man* (that western legal fiction) would have done under similar circumstances. Would it be reasonable for someone to believe that a malevolent supernatural being was incontrovertibly present? In the Manyikan *weltanschauung*, indubitably so, but not according to western legal assumptions. Mdlawini's advocate is made to argue that a totalising spiritual world outlook holds rural Africans in thrall with the same imperative command that the experience of pain holds over individuals:

> "What I have said about imaginary pains," the advocate continued, "applies to our civilised attitude to the belief of the primitive in the supernatural. We have acquired, (I wonder?), the certainty of the mechanical law of cause and effect, which banishes unreasoning fear in the knowledge that nothing can harm us which is not conformable with the laws of nature. We civilised people have achieved this state of comparative security, at the price of the comforting conviction that there exist magicians and witchdoctors. The primitive African, on the contrary, still fears malicious spirits, which he actually perceives, sees and hears.

> According to his outlook, everything in nature is active, is animate, and can suddenly and capriciously turn hostile towards him…" (Bk3 Ch6)

Two points deserve emphasis. The failure of western law to render a *humane* form of justice in Mdlawini's case is the metafictional spur which sends Chawafambira back to his rural home, having "failed" in his efforts to adapt to modernising South Africa. However, this retreat does not cripple Sachs's major thesis holding that African and European psychologies are basically the same. The difference is demonstrated to be one of contradictory cultures, not of psychology. Bald sociological binaries mask the complexity of individual lives, obscuring much that Sachs wants to evoke, understand and celebrate in his novel. If abstract notions such as tradition versus modernity were its defining burden, Sachs need never have written the story of John Chawafambira.

Secondly, and more subversively, an underlying irony of Sachs's novel–invisible to him–is that it explicitly seeks to validate a psychological world view rooted in and derived from a style of mythical thinking very comparable in character to that which underlies the belief systems of traditional societies–namely early Freudianism. The modes align perfectly. Paradoxically, it is the legal system's rejection of just such mythical thinking as we see in early Freudianism that symbolically expels Chawafambira from Johannesburg, undermining Sachs's cherished hypothesis of psychological uniformity in deference to a rational and serviceable cultural construct, namely post-Enlightenment rationality.

Of course, Sachs was writing during the tumultuous initial phases of Freud's influence, Freud 1.0 if you will. In this first version of the *nganga*'s story, he is confident that Freud has discovered a definitive and comprehensive explanation and remedy for the cultural wounds suffered by "John Chawafambira", whose sad experience he enlists to form a minatory fable rebuking the callous attitudes of white South African society.

To twenty-first century sensibilities the crude parameters of this debate seem bizarre and appalling, but they go some way towards illustrating why and how many Western intellectuals of the early twentieth century fell on Freudianism with such rapturous enthusiasm. With the publication of *Totem and Taboo* in 1913, Freud had seemingly supplied the lynchpin connecting all evolved and evolving human cultures across time, past and present, in one unified field–that of sexuality. Here was a new "key to all mythologies", patently solving the historical maze of comparative mythology which had so tantalised George Eliot's character, Edward Casaubon, in her novel *Middlemarch* (1871). Whereas Casaubon labored to bind all the world's disparate mythologies to Christian theology (a mare's

nest of staggering proportions), Freud produced a unifying psychoanalytic theory of human nature which deftly sidestepped the issue.

No longer were cultures insulated from each other by idiosyncratic and incommensurate mythical adherences–solar mythologies versus lunar mythologies, different attitudes to weather phenomena or natural catastrophe, all the distinctive typologies fought over by comparative mythology across the long nineteenth century. Just as Freudianism claimed to view mental disorders and neuroses in the same ambit as normal mental processes–this was the overt thrust of *Totem and Taboo*–so now all human cultures could be explored and compared in a common framework. Freud plunged beneath anthropological data to assert that all these cultural phenomena were grounded in one field, human sexuality. He seized on the two rules or prescripts of totemism, "not to kill the totem and not to sleep with a woman of the same totem", having become overwhelmingly impressed by their conspicuous reiteration of the two crimes of Oedipus, "who killed his father and married his mother". He found even more salient "the insufficient repression" or the "reawakening" of these primal impulses in children, "which forms the nucleus of perhaps every psychoneurosis" (Freud 2010, 153). For Freud, these primal wishes of the child (present both in children and adults, and therefore, perforce, in "primitives") lie at the base of religious formation and culture, a hidden force underlying the observable facts. All phenomena of human life become united in (or related to) this singular, special, inaccessible motivation.

In arriving at this conclusion, Freud had clearly departed radically from empirical science, from his role as an allopathic physician and psychopathologist. His leap to metaphysics has been much debated, especially as to when he first read Schopenhauer, but no one who has pondered the chapter "The Metaphysics of Sexual Love" in *The World As Will and Representation* (1966, [1819]) could fail to see a profound connection. Bryan Magee, in *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (1997), states it as follows: "the idea that our actions, responses and thoughts are for the most part unconsciously motivated; that most of what is unconscious is unconscious because it is repressed; that it is repressed because we would find it too disturbing to keep it available to consciousness; and that sexual motivation, whether conscious or unconscious, is omnipresent" (307). These are the fundamental metaphysical assumptions of Freudianism.

Reading Sachs, we must acknowledge that he accepted Freud's interpretation of Oedipus in *Totem and Taboo* at face value. Although well-versed in the debates and schisms that had haunted Freudianism since its inception, any radical scepticism regarding the Freudian Oedipus complex, envisioning its complete reworking as expressed later by neo-Freudian

practitioners such as Karen Horney (1939) and Erich Fromm (1941), came too late to make an impact on *African Tragedy*. Both analysts are mentioned in Sachs's *Psychoanalysis* (1934) but their strident apostasy proclaiming bluntly, as Dagmar Herzog puts it, "that the Oedipus complex had never existed in any culture, that the whole idea was best seen as Freud's own fantasy or as an unwarranted extrapolation from limited evidence" (2017, 190) is never up for consideration.

Seemingly, Sachs had little interest in the philosophical antecedents of the Freudian revolution. He acknowledged that the concept of the unconscious "was not invented by Freud" (1934, 91), but the historical train of thought sketched in Lancelot Law Whyte's *The Unconscious Before Freud* (1962) was *terra incognita.* Whyte's seminal work was inspired by his recognition that Ernest Jones' biography of Freud failed to situate psychoanalysis in the slow development of European thought over several centuries (Rogers 1992, 430). According to Rogers there is still reluctance on the part of psychoanalysts and psychologists to acknowledge this long precedent cultural history. Given the radical novelty of Freudian thought when he wrote, Sachs's fulsome acceptance of much that would later be questioned is unsurprising. The sense of espousing a valuable new outlook on human experience as a whole, one with incalculable therapeutic promise, was what excited him. Perhaps Freud's statement in his Preface to *Totem and Taboo* that the essays "seek to bridge the gap between…social anthropology, philology and folklore on the one hand, and psycho-analysis on the other" (2010, x) seemed to Sachs an adequate justification for his project, for Freud's unifying effort is mirrored exactly in *African Tragedy.* The novel is Sachs's southern African response to the universal invitation to reevaluate human society in Freudian terms, heedless of the fact that, as Jacqueline Rose sagely remarks, "Universalism is always historical–always this or that universalism, never universalism in itself" (1996, 61).

The claims for Oedipal universality are complex and much contested.[9] On the one hand, we have the strident postcolonial assertion,

[9] In a famous debate with Ernest Jones, Malinowski challenged the naïve version of Freudian universalism (espoused by Sachs), arguing that the Oedipus complex was culture-bound and rested on assumptions of patriarchy and patriliny by no means universal. The argument drew on his work with the Tobriand islanders (see for example 1926); but a telling illustration also concerned the matrilineal Bemba people of Northern Rhodesia, later studied in detail by his student, Audrey Richards (1939), where lineage authority vests in the maternal uncle, not the biological father. There can be no Oedipus complex as Freud (and Sachs) conceived it under such circumstances. Ernest Jones responded somewhat equivocally that these variables were merely superficial displacements of the "nuclear family complex" (1924, 169). In his account of ethnopsychoanalysis, Dagmar Herzog captures a wide variety of

typified by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), that the Oedipus is mainly a European ethnic or cultural preoccupation, therefore a false universal imposed on Africa in an act of unconscious colonialist oppression, if not outright racism: in the words of Nicki Hitchcott, merely a "European phantasy" (1993, 62). On the other, we have proponents such as Wulf Sachs arguing strongly for the Oedipus complex as a universal psychological fact which could and should be mobilised in the service of justice for Africans, an index of common humanity manifested through cultural differences, not despite them. This was, at the time, revolutionary.[10] As Jacqueline Rose puts it: "To credit a Black African with an internal world was to go against the creeds, not just of explicit racism but of medical science" (Rose 1998, 334). But cultural difference indeed matters and is strikingly eloquent.[11]

Bertoldi (1998) ably adjudicates the contest between bald universalism and adamantine cultural difference using the work of Tambia (1990), who argues that these two factors, the universal and the culturally salient, are not exclusive but must inevitably cooperate:

> Tambiah lists a range of basic human capacities and operations that should be considered universal: sensory and motor skills, cognitive structures and processes associated with learning, and memory and language. These human universals, he suggests, are entirely consistent with the fact that there exists a diversity of cultures. (Bertoldi 1998,113)

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views which question and modify the naïve notion of a universal Oedipus (2017, 189-192).

[10] Colonial psychiatry in South Africa typically embraced quite contrary convictions: "Despite their lack of knowledge about individual black patients under their care, [white] asylum doctors held strong views about the nature of insanity in black people as a group. These views assumed, and built on, the assumption of biological difference between black and white bodies. Thus, 'primitive' races were seen as having less sophisticated nervous systems than Caucasians, a theory 'proved' with recourse to anatomical studies, such as measurement of skull capacity and weight of brain tissue. If blacks had primitive nervous systems, then it followed that they would suffer from 'simpler forms of mania', rather than melancholia, which was considered to be a vulnerability of the highly developed nervous systems of white people" (Swartz 1995, 414-15).

[11] It would not have escaped Sachs's notice that when Freud, especially in *Totem and Taboo*, contrasts "civilised" European men with black Africans and indigenous Australians as the barbarian "other", the latter assumes a place then still emblematically occupied by Jews (Frosh 2020, 179), accentuating an important informing impulse behind *African Tragedy.*

Cultures develop and differentiate themselves in interaction with their environments. Postcolonialists, and more recently decolonialists, exclusively and mistakenly reify the resulting cultural differences at the expense of acknowledging universally informing ontogenetic features which demonstrate the "unity of humankind" (Bertoldi 1998, 126). Many would regard this fissiparous move as an impoverishment, muddled and politically unacceptable.

However it must be acknowledged that few today would argue without qualification for the scientific adequacy of Freudianism, as Sachs does, even though Freud's influence still infuses much contemporary popular culture. It may well be that for many Sachs's novel has now to be read "as if" Freudianism were true, a quite usual approach when encountering alien fashions, philosophies and *Weltanschauungen* from the past (Vaihinger 1924). The historical eye must first see the historical text before adopting twenty-first century spectacles.

What about Hamlet or *Hamlet*? The theme which becomes so prominent in *Black Hamlet* is near to invisible in *African Tragedy.* Sachs only mentions Shakespeare's play towards the very end of his novel, describing John's predicament as "a very perfect replica of the Hamlet situation", "the crux of Hamlet's tragedy" (Bk4 Ch2). The parallel occurs only in passing, whereas the Freudian Oedipus complex, marinated in social anthropology and folklore, is all-pervasive. We must recognise that Sachs's "Hamlet" is not simply or merely the character discerned by Freud and Ernest Jones, the schema neatly described in Sachs's book *Psychoanalysis* (1934, 53-90). Sachs meets Hamlet via the profound resonance the character has in Russian literature, with its enduring emphasis on "Hamletism"–passivity and delay and self-preoccupied rumination.[12]

This is something much cherished by Dostoyevsky (Movsesian 2020) and this is what Sachs saw in John Chawafambira. He was deeply imbued with a "Russian" response to the play, well captured by Oscar Kartoschinsky in 1916 when he wrote:

> It was Hamlet that won the deepest sympathy of the Russians. His passivity, his constant reflection, his everlasting pensiveness–are these not typically Russian traits? We can almost say that in Russia alone Hamlet is sincerely loved and understood. (143)

The assumption of a shared sensibility (accurate or not) between this Russian Hamlet and the Rhodesian *nganga* establishes a bond between the writer Sachs and his portrait of "John Chawafambira" possibly deeper than any proffered by psychoanalysis itself. The later book *Black Hamlet* benefited hugely from its seductive title, which places a universal Oedipal psychology front and centre, at the same time targeting the growing international interest in Freudianism. In *African Tragedy* Hamlet is an

[12] Chris Thurman has recently explored "Hamletism" in Dostoyevsky both from a South African perspective and more broadly as a deeply European phenomenon (Thurman 2018, 2020).