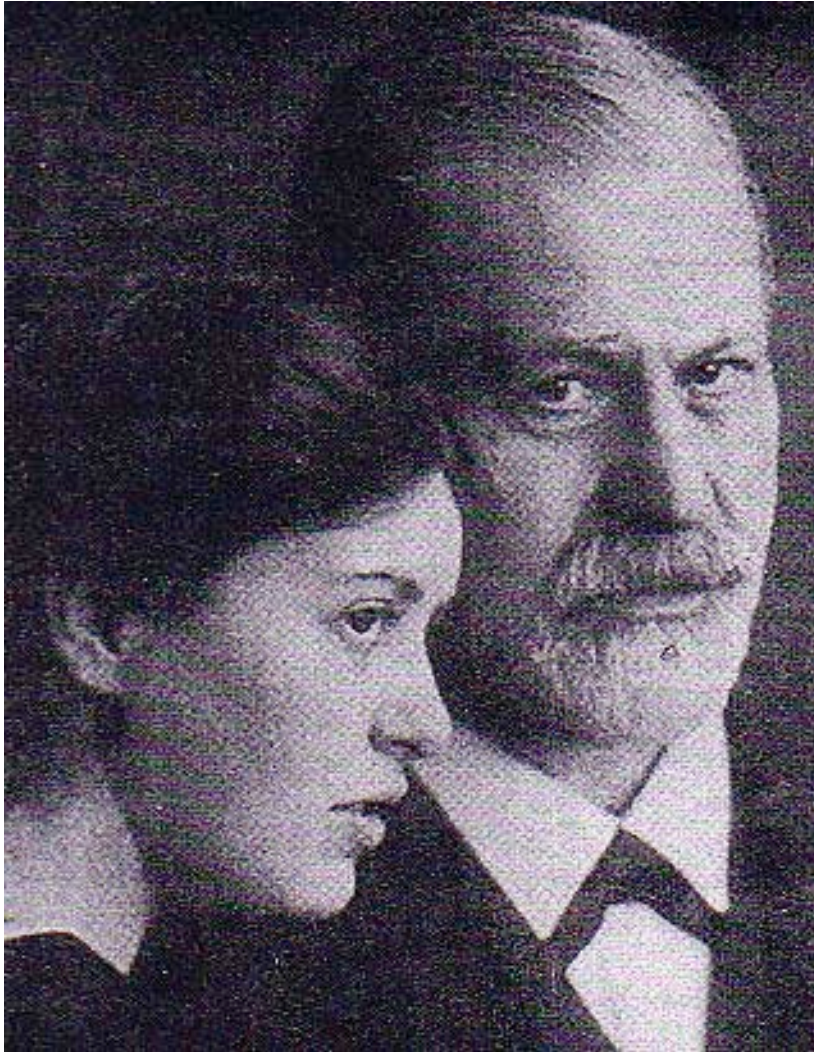


Teaching Freud to Dance

Ruben Mowszowski



A hundred years ago Sigmund Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams* and announced the existence of the unconscious; a part of ourselves that previously we hardly knew existed. It is the part of our mind that speaks through dreams and drives us in ways we are unaware of. The work that allows us to see the unconscious in what we say and dream is known as psychoanalysis. Freud knew it would be resisted from the start. Becoming conscious of what is unconscious means allowing into the open that which wants to be concealed and there-

fore, by definition, it will be resisted. Added to that is the current tendency in the West to topple icons. Freud is a prime target. In recent years a number of books have been written alleging that he was, among other things, a fraud.

A recent article in *The Lancet* contains the following comments about Freud and psychoanalysis: One of the most extraordinary aberrations in the history of western thought...the most stupendous confidence trick of the 20th century...a quack, brutally inquisitorial...rape of the mind...a cargo-cult scientist...ruthlessly ambitious... brutally insensitive and unscrupulous...a vision of humanity that was impoverishing... arrogant...overriding the testimony of ordinary people...messianic fan-

tasies...deep insecurity...raging hunger for recognition...utterly without merit...supreme manipulator.

Infuriatingly for Freud's detractors, their opposition to Freud's theories is predicted by his theory of resistance which it thereby proves – according to Freudians at any rate. Not so to psychiatrist RC Tallis, author of the article, who announced that the 'incubus' (*evil spirit*) that Freud had placed on our minds was finally about to be lifted. Frederick Crews, a professor in English at a Californian university concurs. Psychoanalysis, he says, is 'demonology'. Perhaps, as we shall see, there is something to this, though one suspects it is not exactly what he has in mind.

What could provoke such bitterness towards the man, his theory and practice? According to British psychoanalyst John Forrester, in *Dispatches from the Freud Wars*, 'there is no mistaking...their heartfelt wish that Freud might never have been born, or failing to achieve that end, that all his works and influence be made as nothing.'

Now, just when the Freudian era has been announced over, psychoanalysis is returning to South Africa in the form of the country's first ever psychoanalytic conference. Are we in danger of importing beliefs that have passed their use-by date? Not to worry, says Forrester. 'There is as little chance of going back to pre-Freudian beliefs as there is of going back to pre-Copernican beliefs.'

Well, I know what he means, but Forrester, like Tallis, is a Westerner and Westerners like Marx and Freud have had a funny way of claiming truths for all of humanity when they have never been outside Europe or stepped outside their own Western paradigm. What, I wondered, does this strange practice that we call psychoanalysis have to offer a country like ours where large numbers of people hold a view of the world that incorporates the presence of ancestors and where there is currently an epidemic of violence?

Inquiries led me to Martin Miller, a psychanalytically-inclined psychotherapist. Miller works out of a small house in a quiet street in Cape Town. His consulting room, echoing Freud's, is filled with artefacts; not once-buried ones like his, but figures and masks from Africa that seem quite comfortable out in the open.

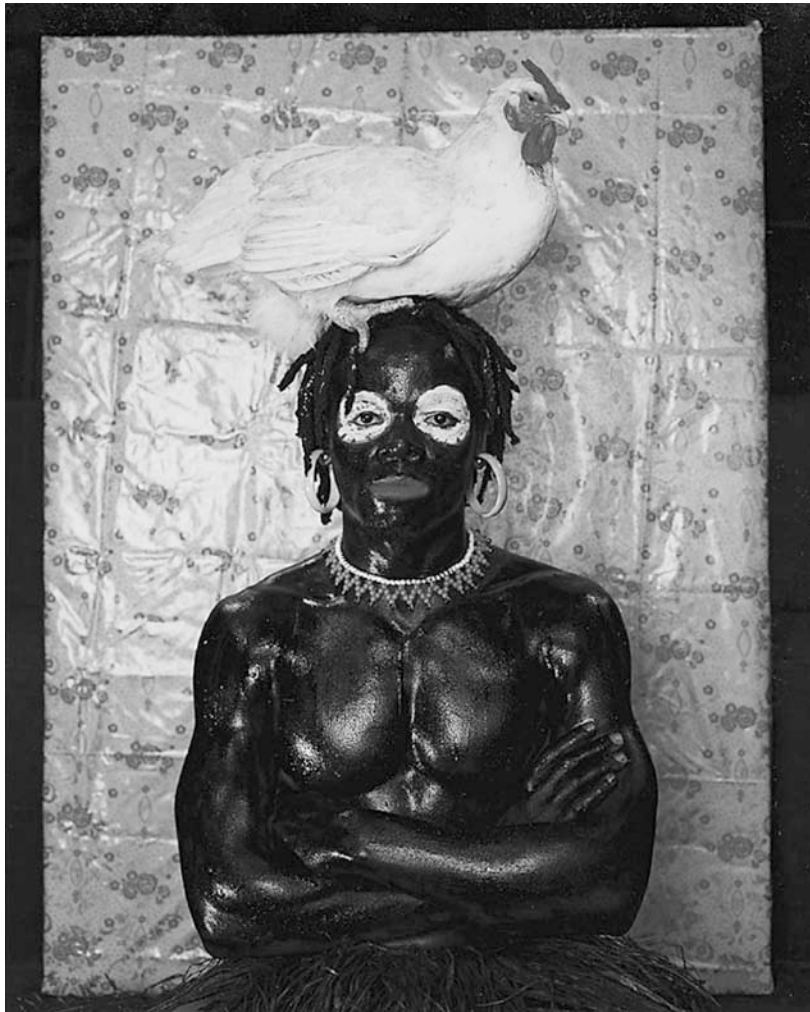
Psychoanalysis never really left South Africa, says Miller. Training was withdrawn and sanctions applied, so that those who wanted to practice had to go to the UK. Those who remained had to make do with what ever input they could, and they obtained this from a multiplicity of sources, including indigenous practices. Miller himself is an ordained minister of the Zionist African Church.

Not that there were that many, he says. Psychoanalysis takes years to do and in this place of blood and mayhem psychologists generally go for quicker and cheaper fixes. In South Africa, the tendency was to regard Freudian psycholanalysis as a white elitist Eurocentric thought system, but in other places, South America for instance, psychoanalysis is regarded as revolutionary because it undoes the con-ditioning of the state.

Miller explains: 'Psychoanalysis deals with fractures and conflicts in different parts of the psyche, and this is the actual situation here. Apartheid kept everything in neat boxes but now it is blowing apart. The rainbow nation is a lovely message, but it is not the truth. We are at best a loose agglomeration of interest groups. South Africa is suffering from a kind of multiple-personality disorder - a condition of borderline psychosis.'

He likens the condition to *umafufunyana* - a form of possession experienced by black adolescent girls - 'a transient psychotic episode where parts of the personality are split off from other parts'. We are keeping up a same and rational exterior, he says, but we are terrified - a 'reaction formation' in psycho-speak. Inevitably we talk about crime. 'PW Botha was the ultimate superego (morally restrictive) figure with that wagging finger of his,' he says, 'now suddenly the lid is off , and it's brought out some very difficult parts of the unconscious. We had a huge police force-army. Not very nice to live with but now what we are seeing is the terror of the unrestrained id (unconscious or instinctual part of the mind) - 44 million angry adolescents - I make no racial boundaries; pubescents of 13 and 14 experimenting, trying a bit of drinking and smoking and fucking and killing and it's allowing a very base, if I can use such an old fashioned word, part of human nature to emerge - one which was tightly controlled by the regime, otherwise we would have dealt with this stuff a long time ago. People are bloody terrified to admit that the centre is not holding.'

But this was Western psychology. I wanted an African explanation. I got it in a play by Cape Town writer-director Brett Bailey. Called *iMambo Jumbo*, the play depicts 'the true intrepid, sacred and quixotic quest of Chief Gcaleka,' a liquor salesman and sangoma (traditional healer/diviner), who goes to Scotland to find and bring back the skull of his ancestor, King Hintsas, said to have been beheaded by the British in 1836. Gcaleka claimed that Hintsas's 'hell spirit' was responsible for the country's crime wave and its return would usher in a period of peace and fertility. Gcaleka explains to the audience: 'The little boy has fallen in love with his big mama, a man is fucking a dog, the dog is fucking a woman and the boy is fucking his grand-



mother. How does a 15 year-old boy know that his grandmother is something to fuck? He goes to court and gets five years but what does the spirit know about five years? The spirit is angry because the head is severed from the body.'

At the end of every sentence, the cast and some of the black members of the audience shout: '*Vumani*' (do you agree?) just like at a real event. A chicken is ceremoniously carried in and two women in the audience, whom I know to be vegetarians, rush out the auditorium.

The play, with its mixed cast of real sangomas and actors, presumes the reality of the ancestral world, a world in which, according to one newspaper report, most black South Africans still believe. But the largely white Johannesburg audience is restrained. Could this be a revival of the idea of the happy rural native?

Gcaleka returned triumphantly with the head that he found - or rather was guided to in dreams - but a team of medical experts, led by the legendary paleo-anthropologist Phillip Tobias, declared it to be the head of a young Scottish woman not more than 50 years old. There was no way it could be Hintsas's.

When the play is over the real Gcaleka appears on stage. One after another black person stands up to criticise him. He is a fraud. The head did not belong to Hintsas. He must apologise to the Xhosa people. Suddenly it seems hopeless. Science and political correctness have won the day. While people in the Western world seek to rediscover knowledge belonging to the traditional societies they displaced, and scientists at the cutting edge find themselves in the same world as mystics, we are

abandoning the shaman's art for the middle ground of science. We have embodied not only the tyranny of the coloniser but the fear of the pagan. It occurs to me that if only Dr Freud could learn to dance the world might be saved.

Afterwards, over a coffee, Bailey explains: The performance was a real event (except that they did not slaughter the chicken.) He is distressed about the attack on Gcaleka. As far as the ancestors are concerned, the head was Hintsas. Symbolically it belonged to Hintsas. Emotionally and spiritually it was Hintsas and that is the way Gcaleka understood it. Tallis and Crews would no doubt say it was a fraud.

But I wanted to talk about children and violence; about the little boy falling in love with his big mama, about the fifteen year-old fucking his grandmother. I had spoken to British psychotherapist Valerie Sinason, one of the scheduled conference speakers, over the phone. She had a lot to say about adolescent boys living in fatherless homes; who sleep in the same bed as their mothers and the likelihood of them becoming future perpetrators of violence against women but nothing on what to do about it. I needed to speak to someone local.

Marilyn Donaldson is a Johannesburg psychotherapist working with abused children. I visited her in a large house in a leafy suburb protected against the city's rampaging id by the usual high walls and automatic gates. She tells me of six-year-old boys, themselves abused children, who have raped two year old girls (yes it is possible - sexuality in abused children is awakened early) of a 15-year-old boy - he is very beautiful - who is a hijacker and 'has probably killed people' but who has a bed-wetting problem. When he wets the bed, his mother with whom he shares it, takes him into the yard and pours a bucket of cold water over him. He is suffering from anxiety. She looks at me. 'You know, they are not evil monsters, she says, they're children.'

I am reminded of the original meaning of the word compassion. I recall what Erich Fromm said about Freud: that his most radical act was to suggest through his work that a single human being was of inexhaustible interest; that the value of a human could not be measured in economic terms; that a human being was not commensurable with any 'thing' or object.

I had asked the Institute for the Study of Violence if they had any information on the link between boys in fatherless households sharing the bed with their mothers and the likelihood of them committing violence against women in the future, and they had said they did not. Donaldson had once worked at the Institute.

'We have been of the view,' she says, 'that psychology is a Western model and who are we, as whites, to start talking about imposing it on an African world. But I think maybe we've missed something by being too apologetic; too careful to be politically correct.'

She describes child abuse as a war of men and masculinity against women and children - mostly girls but now extending to boys too. 'I just wonder sometimes,' she says, 'how can a society turn on its children the way our society has. What drives a nation to destroy its future?' Bleak words.

Actually, psychoanalysis is not new to South Africa. In the 1930's and 40's there were two psychoanalysts practicing in Johannesburg. One was Fritz Perls who had been sent to South Africa to train other analysts. The other was Wulf Sachs. Perls went on to become the founder of the Gestalt movement in the United States. Sachs, who died in 1949, is best remembered for his book *Black Hamlet*, about the analysis of a black *inyenga* (traditional herbalist/healer) called Chavafambira

Sachs had observed that schizophrenia took the same form in the black man as in the white man. He had concluded from this that the minds of the sane in each group must also be identical - a radical view for white South Africa in the thirties. He met Chavafambira at a worker's hostel and offered him an exchange. He would show the *inyenga* his medicine and Chavafambira would show Sachs his. And so began one of the strangest analyses ever.

These days, of course, the idea of an analyst putting a shaman onto his *chaise longue* hoping to understand him through the filter of his own world view without an equal understanding of the shaman's world view would be regarded as ludicrous. From *Black Hamlet*, we learn very little about traditional healing. Whether Chavafambira learned anything about psychoanalysis we are not told.

I promised at the beginning of this story to say more about Crews' statement that psychoanalysis was demonology. It is an idea which nags at the back of my mind and it goes like this: In Ancient Greece, the daimon was a personal spirit guide - a kind of higher self. When the road forked, when one was confused, it was wise to follow one's daimon. With the rise of Christianity, all spirits not under the wing of the church, were declared unlawful and in the service of satan. The daimon became a demon. But old gods and spirits never really go away. They just take new forms.

Jung said they reappear as our pathologies.

So let us imagine we are in Vienna in Dr Freud's consulting room. It is filled with ancient gods and fertility figures like those belonging to Chavafambira. The patient lies on the couch so she does not see the Doctor, and she says in a trancelike way whatever comes into her mind. Or she tells him of a dream and he listens and dreams along with her. And while he listens, he uses some other faculty of his mind to watch what he is feeling and thinking.

And slowly the ancestors make themselves known and the mythical figures come to life. The mothers and fathers enter the room, the grandparents; all the important people from the patients past. If it is going well, the spirit of the mother and father might enter into the analyst and the patient will talk to them through him and experience once again the feelings she had as a child for her parents. For one hour of Viennese time, the patient has been, not in modern Europe, but in the ancestral world. In a certain sense one might say, that inside Dr Freud's consulting room was Africa.

How did he get away with it in a society which killed its medicine women, burned those who entertained unorthodox thoughts, and is still paranoid about demonology? He created a theory that looked like science (the daimon became the superego) and explained everything in terms of the theory. This is true shamanism. Lest you think this too fanciful, I remind you that Freud was fascinated by the occult, practised numerology, believed in telepathy and omens, and was cunning enough to keep all this out of the discipline of psychoanalysis. If the two readers of dreams could join forces, if Sachs could learn the shamanic dance and Chavafambira, the use of the couch, if Hintsá's head and body could be reunited, would not a new and unprecedented psychology emerge for those of us who live in this new and unprecedented nation?

Published as 'Can we teach Dr Freud to dance?' Mail & Guardian 1998