Alternatives to Oedipus: stories for thinking about sex and sexuality across cultures (Crossfields 2018)

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Introduction

One of the things that complicates communication in an increasingly globalised and networked world is the very natural tendency to look at other cultures through the lens of what is familiar, over-emphasising what we think we recognise, and missing what seems different. Stories play a key role in this: within a culture, experience of the world shapes the stories we use to think about ourselves, and the stories we use shape how we see the world. While it is easy enough to translate the words of a story, the unconscious content tends to get left behind, so that another culture functions as an imperfect mirror, reflecting back only what seems familiar.

This paper explores this by looking again at Freud’s use of the Oedipus myth — the story of a man who murders his father and marries his mother, and pays a terrible price for his transgression. Out of this, he formulated the Oedipus Complex as a way to make sense of sex, sexuality and social organisation. He saw this as universal, which fits in with a Western tendency to see the rest of the world through Western eyes. But it is also possible to read Freud’s formula as how one Jewish man living in Vienna at the end of the nineteenth century made sense of his world, which carries the possibility that others might use quite different stories to make sense of their’s.

A hint that there is something else going on lies in the fact that Freud first names the complex in relation to dreams [Freud 1900], which he sees as part of engaging with what has been repressed into the unconscious. Lacan makes the point that there are also things which don’t get this far, which he describes as “foreclosed” [Lacan 1955–56]. This offers a way to think about the things in one culture that people can’t see in another [Argent 2017b], so that they fall outside dreams and myths, and, if they are around at all, appear as inarticulable and seemingly-irrational anxieties.

Problems with the Oedipal

At this distance, obvious problems with this formula include down-playing the experience of women and overlooking siblings and the extended family circle. This is not to say that psychoanalysis has been wrong to use the Oedipus complex, but does suggest that it’s not the whole story.

Three recent personal examples frame this. One was a family wedding, where lots of what was going on seemed to make sense in Oedipal terms. Another was the death of a friend’s first wife after a story with all the complexity of an Italian baroque opera. People didn’t reject those plots as absurd because they drew on the intertwined realities of life, which makes Freud’s triangle of mother-father-child seem like a flight from reality rather than a description of it. The third example is the death of someone I have known since the age of three. Like me, she had no children of her own, and in thinking about how I have responded to the children of friends, the sense is that something was modelled, which is not about standing in a pseudo-parental role and is a reminder of the importance of extended networks of friends and family.

At a more general level, Juliet Mitchell [Mitchell 2003] points out that we symbolise things we lack and suggests that Freud wrote in such a male-centred way as an articulation of what was already passing.

This can be taken further. An assassin’s bullet in June 1914 killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and precipitated a chain of events that radically altered the world, bringing the First World War and arguably the Russian Revolution, the Second World War and the Cold War, and...
radical changes in the balance of genders and the ending of the days when European empires covered a great swathe of the world.

Writing on the eve of that upheaval it is hard to imagine that that would not have affected Freud and the analysands in relation to whom he developed his ideas. But this was also something that took people by surprise, so it was “in the air” but not available to be talked about. From that perspective, Freud’s view of view of the Oedipal as universal sounds like an expression of the Western dominance that was coming to an its end, rather than something fundamental, which in turn locates it in Freud’s own unconscious processes [Lacan 1969–70].

**Cracking open the possibilities**

A crucial step on the way to this paper has been Philip Boxer’s *Three moments and two crises* [Boxer 2014], which draws on Lacan’s essay *Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty* [Lacan 1945].

In essence, Boxer suggests that it is possible to look at a group or organisation and think one knows what is going on (the first moment). But then there is the realisation that things are not so simple (the first crisis) and more work is needed (the second moment). That in its turn fails to come to a conclusion (the second crisis) leading to a “moment to conclude” (the third moment). The significance of the “moment to conclude” is that one of the tools of the Lacanian approach to psychoanalysis is to interrupt things — typically by stopping an analytic session early — with the thought that this disruption enables learning.

That description sounds abstract, but the first chink of something interesting is the first crisis. This is more than an intellectual assessment that further research would be useful. It’s actually about realising that the conscious and unconscious processes pointing to one’s initial understanding are not the whole story, so their failure creates the possibility of moving to a new understanding. This means that it’s possible to move from another culture being an imperfect mirror that reflects the familiar, to a partial awareness that the mirror is imperfect. An awareness that the mirror is reflecting parts of one’s own culture increases the awareness that one’s own culture is one among many, even if it seems universal, which becomes the start of a new learning.

At the time of encountering that approach I had agreed to give a paper on learning from my encounters with Balinese Hindus [Argent 2017a]. That included an exploration of the Balinese Barong Dance, which seems to be a very different way of exploring sex and sexuality across the extended family and community. Seeing a very different approach gave a strong sense of Freud’s formula as a product of his context.

This matters because the emergence of China and India as major world powers, and the changes brought by technology, global connectedness, and the threat of climate change, are changing the world profoundly.

Attempts to read Chinese literature in Oedipal terms have run into problems leading people to conclude that the model doesn’t fit [Gu 2009], so for psychoanalysis to help, it needs to see beyond this lens. Conversely, writing of the dynamics of contemporary business leadership in India, Ashok Malhotra [Malhotra 2018] expresses the complexity of the balancing act performed by many managers in the interface between essentially-Western models of doing business and their Indian cultural heritage. That tension is quite different from what is experienced in the West, and speaks of another layer of inter-cultural complexity.

It’s helpful to bear in mind that, in the time since Freud, ancient Greece has gone from being seen as the cradle of civilisation, to a cradle of Western civilisation. More sharply, Ian Morris’ book *Why the west rules — for now* [Morris 2010], offers a brilliant account of how the West came to dominate the world — largely through accidents of geography. Western thought has tended to cluster...
around the idea that this is inevitable, as though something unique descended from the gods in ancient Greece. The passing of western dominance is hard for Westerners to engage with because it radically alters how we are used to thinking of ourselves. Stories and myths, and the broader mechanisms of repression and unconscious processes make sense within a stable cultural context, where there are shared values controlling what is and is not acceptable, but when things are changing too rapidly they can’t be processed at that level, and we’re in the world of what is foreclosed instead.

**Alternatives to Oedipus**

To make this a little less abstract, I’d like to pick up a number of other models which can be seen as engaging with what Freud explores in the idea of the Oedipus complex, and a thought on why he might have needed to not draw on some of what was close at hand in his Jewish heritage.

1. **Siblings: Did Oedipus have siblings?**

Juliet Mitchell [Mitchell 2003] rightly highlights the way in which Freud’s formula overlooks the role of siblings and, by extension, of the wider family and community. I’m particularly struck that what she writes seems obvious after it has been read, as if she is naming something half-hidden. This makes most in the language of repression — knowledge pushed away — as though he was choosing not to see something in his culture. The question “Did Oedipus have siblings?” is subversive because, having married his mother, his siblings are also his children, which is something Freud doesn’t dwell on.

More generally, later psychoanalysts, including Melanie Klein [Klein 1946] and Jacques Lacan [Lacan 1957 and 1963–64] have used the idea of the Oedipal for stages of life much earlier than Freud does, but following Freud’s use throws up a problem because he is assuming that both parents are still alive. In affluent circles in Freud’s Vienna, that assumption is reasonable, but it was not so long since average life expectancies had been in people’s mid-30s, so it was not a foregone conclusion that both parents were around when a child reached Freud’s “Oedipal stage” (3–5 years).

In Lacanian terms, Mitchell floats the idea that the link of the paternal function with the symbolic order invites an understanding of the maternal in relation to the imaginary. What lies behind that is the sense of the paternal function being what enables the infant to cope with human limitedness by symbolising what they lack. But Lacan suggests that the child first begins to form a sense of itself when it sees its reflection in a mirror — or, by extension, in the reactions of others. That means a child’s sense of itself is shaped by interaction with other children, as well as the vertical relationship with parents, so siblings have a profound effect on a child’s development. She points out that the violence of the first world war was described in fratricidal terms [Mitchell 2003] — did the failure to engage with sibling connections mean it had to happen with extreme violence? One way to make sense of this is in terms of society’s privileging the vertical relationship between parents and children over the horizontal link with siblings, making the fratricidal violence of the first world war an example of where the failure to recognise this can land.

An extension of this is the relationship between different cultures as siblings. Part of the struggle of global change is for Western culture to start to see other cultures as siblings, rather than “different and inferior”. Although Morris [Morris 2010] is right to suggest that western dominance of the world rests on accidents of geography rather than any intrinsic superiority, we in the West might well have needed to see ourselves as superior in order to justify our behaviour in colonising great swathes of the world. It goes against centuries of conditioning to set that aside and see things differently.
In religious terms, Christianity, as the main religion of the West, talks of Jesus as the “only-begotten son of the father” [John 3:16]. That ignores his siblings [Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55–56] — an ignorance enshrined, despite that perspective, in the view of his mother as always a virgin. More sharply, it casts him as an only child, and by extension, Christianity as in a unique relationship to God, compounding the difficulty of moving into a sibling relationship between faiths and cultures.

2. The Balinese Barong dance
The Barong dance is a rich and highly complex play which is both the acting of a story, and a religious ritual. Looked at through Western eyes, it reads as an exploration of sex and sexuality across an extended group of people. That chimes in with the way in which the performance itself, and its attendant rituals and the making and storing of masks and costumes involve many people in the village, so it is very much a collective process.

There are lots of local variants, so it’s hard to give an exact version of the plot. At its core is a story drawn from the Javanese Colonarung myth [Eiseman 1990], about a witch called Rangda, and a creature called Barong (actually two people in a lion-like costume). The narrative doesn’t make sense in Oedipal terms, and the sense that it is processing the same aspect of being human, but in a totally different way, offers a way to think of Freud’s model as rooted in his culture rather than universal.

In the story, Rangda is a widow, whose daughter cannot find a husband because men fear her as a mother-in-law. Versions of the story include her kidnapping a young girl in revenge or for human sacrifice. Barong is androgyneous: sometimes called dewa ayu, where “dewa” is a male form of god and “ayu” means a beautiful woman. In the story the Rangda casts a spell on the babuten, Barong’s attendants, making them stab themselves with their kris knives. Barong in turn casts a spell which puts them in a trance where the blades do no harm — in the actual “performance” this becomes a real trance, with rituals to attend the religious aspect if someone does actually injure themselves. Some of the characters are clearly gendered, but the Sendar are men who adopt very feminine gestures.

An important piece of context is that Balinese Hindus see the placenta, blood, waxy covering on a baby and the amniotic fluid that accompany a baby into the world as a person’s “spirit guardians” (kunda empat) who guide and help them through and beyond life. That opens up some very rich territory and calls to mind the explorations of the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion on the impact of a person’s birth on them [Bion 1977]. Barong is usually seen as a form of banaspati raja, the spirit guardian associated with the placenta [Emigh 1966 and Eismann 1990].

One way to read the story is around the dynamics of extended families and the power of mother-in-law figures, the negotiation of gender, and the complexity of forming relationships when things are so entwined. That’s paralleled in one of the readings of the story which is about the gods struggling to withdraw from the world, having created it.

This is a culture that has a tradition of polygamy, and one reading of the ritual stabbing is that it reflects fighting in former times that created a gender imbalance, and attempts to mitigate that.

However the story is read, it is not about Randa or Barong winning, but about the restoration of balance. That also feels a very different structure from Western myths where good vanquishes evil, and the sense of balance restored feels a long way from Freud’s concept of desires being held in place by the incest taboo.

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3. Ajasa complex

When the Japanese Heisaku Kosawa went to see Freud with a view to establishing psychoanalysis in Japan, he got very short shrift for suggesting that the Japanese have Ajasa complex rather than the Oedipus complex [Kosawa 2009]. Yet he has a point — this provides a way to think about a context where the father is much less central, and the quiet-seeming mother is much more dominant than in the West.

In essence, Prince Ajasa has his father, the king, imprisoned, while he tries to usurp the throne. He discovers that his mother is smuggling food to his father, and seeks to kill her. Courtiers intervene, suggesting that princes killing their father to take the thrown is a well-worn path, but killing the mother goes too far. Overwhelmed with remorse, he seeks out the Buddha, who consoles him with the thought that we are not fully responsible for our actions. It turns out that, before his birth, Ajasa’s mother had killed a holy man, understanding that he would be reborn as her son — Ajasa — so that the mother he has sought to kill has already killed him.

That’s a very different story. Key differences include the fact that the murderous impulses are directed towards the mother rather than the father, and that the idea of role of the symbolic father in separating mother and baby so that the infant can begin to engage with the wider world has gone, with the implication that this is picked up more gradually form the rather more inter-connected surrounding culture.

4. The Mahabharata

There is a story that, in the days of the British Empire, people in the colonial service were encouraged to read the Hindu epic The Mahabharata [Dharma 1999] in order to get an understanding of India.

The story unfolds around the court at Hastinapur and weaves through the rich web of connections in an extended family. In a sense it is about honour, duty, wisdom, and individuals navigating themselves around social order and conflict.

The war at its centre, and the tensions leading up to it, make sense in terms of sibling-like rivalries between the Pandava and Kaurava brothers. Leading up to that war there is a mounting sense of tension, as if people are caught up in something unavoidable. That is underscored as the battle is about to begin, when there is an extended dialogue between Arjuna (third of the Pandava brothers) and Krishna, known as the Bhagavad-Gita in which Krishna, speaking of life and virtue, explains to Arjuna that it is his duty to fight.

The sexual element doesn’t carry a hint of patricide, but there is a rich, and sometimes surprising, web of what is possible, and the conventions that enable a variety of ways of being. These include the five Pandava brothers’ polyandrous marriage with Drupadi. At one stage Arjuna, lives for a year unrecognised as a “member of the third sex”. Another key character, Bhishma, vows not to marry (and have children) and to be loyal to the throne of Hastinapur. At times he is deeply uncomfortable with the conduct of Hastinapur’s rulers. That can equally be read as a gay character, achieving a place of great depth through woundedness, and as someone navigating honour and fate.

Bhishma’s father, King Shantanu had married Ganga, an incarnation of the Ganges, agreeing not to question what she did. Trapped by that vow, he is horrified when she drowns her first seven sons at birth. There’s an immediate association to this making sense of people’s experiences of the death of babies, locating a common part of human experience in the story. In the narrative it is explained in terms of a curse placed on them in a previous life, from which Ganga is releasing them. This is one of a number of places where the idea of reincarnation appears, significantly reshaping
the story and making sense of many things that would otherwise seem strange or arbitrary, and has echoes of the Ajasa story.

5. Yayati complex

Bishma actually makes his vow in order to enable his father to take a new wife who demands that her son becomes succeeds him. Another reading of his story is in terms of the Yayati complex [Pattanaik 2006], based on the story of a king, Yayati, who is cursed to become old and decrepit while in the prime of life, and only to be freed from this if another is willing to exchange his youth for Yayati's premature old age. One of his sons agrees to do this. That's the opposite of the son killing his father to further his own interests, and has been used to think about the situation of children in Indian culture following their parents' wishes rather than their own. But the subtlety is that this also ends up highlighting the superficiality of youthful beauty — in the context of the dialogue between East and West, it also offers a way to both prize and question the youthful self-actualisation idealised in the West.

The Mahabarattha makes Freud's Oedipal triangle looks really simple. Both siblings and extended links across the generations have gone missing. This and the Yayati complex stand in stark contrast with the Western view that we are authors of our own destiny. In thinking about the unconscious, Freud suggested that “the ego is not master in its own house”, [Freud 1917] but the richnesses of the Mahabarattha and the Yayati complex how far that is still an over-simplification, as if in flight from the complexity of culture.

6. A Gay reading of Oedipus

Freud found something in the Oedipus myth which spoke to his understanding of sexuality. Reading the account of Oedipus in Sophocles' Theban Plays from a gay perspective [Argent 2018] offers a very different understanding which highlights the subjectivity of Freud's reading.

Oedipus' curiosity about who he is has parallels in terms of coming out. The price he pays for his learning is huge, costing his sight and his throne, and goes into exile. But he ultimately achieves a place as a respected seer — with echoes of the role that some gay people grow into (and Bishma in Mahabharata). It's particularly interesting that he blinds himself, as if a visible wound is needed in addition to the invisible, and as if he needs to become blind in order to perceive, and to set himself outside any possibility of conventional power to come into his potency.

A gay reading of patricide is not about competition with the father, but about the assault on the family line of not producing children. The wound of Oedipus parents having tried to kill him makes sense in terms of a felt unacceptability for being gay. The chorus has an important role that asks to be heard in terms of the collective process — either as the gods or the collective unconscious — which pulls in a collective element strongly reminiscent of the language around siblings. It also has a powerful sense that we are not authors of our own destiny.

I was also surprised at how far into the plays I got before Oedipus children were mentioned. Mitchell's comments on Oedipus' sisters-as-daughters makes some sense of this, but it also subverts the heteronormative idea of a man's potency being shown in the children he produces. It's particularly striking that, although he has two sons and four daughters, the most striking role of the daughters is in taking care of their blinded father. The brokenness of that situation reminds me of a gay friend's suggestion that coupledom is a defence against people facing themselves, suggesting that something big has to be negated for Freud's Oedipal triangle to work.

There are powerful forces that inhibit curiosity — for which Oedipus' struggle is a good metaphor. It's another way of thinking about engaging with the repressed, and interesting that Bion read the story as one about the perils and necessity of curiosity [Bion 1963].
Where the gay reading might be particularly important is that it pushes to read beyond a heteronormative conventionality, by claiming the space where it is possible to be different. From perspective, convention looks limiting because of the danger that an exploration will take someone out of the conventional, with all the risks this brings.

The chorus also plays a really important role. As with reincarnation in the Ajasa myth and the Mahabharata and the dynamics of the Yayati complex it links the characters to something beyond themselves. They can establish themselves in relation to this, but can’t operate outside it. There’s nothing particularly gay about the story itself, except that reading the story from this perspective suddenly makes Freud’s heteromormative reading look much more relative than he suggests.

7. Genesis
When Freud looks to the Oedipus myth, he looks past his own Jewish heritage. As with the Mahabarattha, it is possible to look to the Hebrew Scriptures and ask how people might have mobilised them to make sense of sex, sexuality and social order. A good starting point is the beginning of the book of Genesis. In the story of Adam and Eve, God creates Adam “after our own likeness… male and female”. God and Adam in the Garden of Eden sounds remarkably like a mother-baby pair, separated by the arrival of Eve — which casts God as mother, and Eve as symbolic father. Adam and Eve form a new pair, separated by the serpent, and by the expulsion from Eden — which could also be read as the paternal function introducing reality.

Myths / scriptures need some ambiguity to create scope for people at widely differing stages of life to find themselves in the story. An example of this is the figure of Lilith, barely hinted at in scripture but expounded in the Kabbalah. She is Adam’s first wife, created out of dust at the same time as him and altogether more feisty than the Eve created out of his rib. That holds a polarity between two very different understandings of the feminine, which sits with the conflict between Cain and Abel as holding different ways of being men. The relative lack of mention of the mothers of people in the story rather shouts, but that’s the wrong observation because their presence is assumed, and adds to the invitation to people to find themselves in the story, so the question becomes “How did people use these stories to make sense of sex, sexuality and society?”.

8. Freud and Judaism
Perhaps Freud turned to the Oedipus myth just because of the perceived role of Greece as the “cradle of civilisation”, and needed to see this as universal in order to duck the question of what was on offer to him in the book of Genesis, and the tensions between Jewish and Christian understandings. That would make sense of the need to see the Oedipal as universal rather than look at more contested territory. But this does put the spotlight on his ambiguous relationship with his Judaism.

On the one hand, he described himself as a “godless Jew”, writes negatively of religion in things like The future of an illusion. He’s said to have forced his wife to eat ham soon after their wedding, and prevented her from lighting sabbath candles. But things are not that simple [Berke 2015].

Yet in the increasingly anti-semitic world he inhabited, it’s hard to imagine Freud’s career not being helped if he had converted to Christianity. The implication is that something held him back, even as anti-semitism made it harder to own and value his Jewish heritage. Among the things standing out are that was named for his grandfather, a rabbi [Berke 2015] — in a culture which saw “naming for” in terms of “carrying on from”. Kabbalah figures prominently in his family background and includes a rich elaboration of scripture and an idea of “hopping of ideas” which sound very much like what he called “free association”. Dreamwork is also seen as important. Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams reads to me like an attempt to make something seem scientific and rational,
which makes sense if he is also partly defending against the complexity of the approach to dreams that he had inherited.

I am left with the suspicion that the Oedipus myth appealed to Freud because it let him sidestep some of his own complex heritage. He overlooks the fact that Oedipus parents tried to kill him as a baby: does that speak of his complex relationship with his forebears, particularly the Rabbi grandfather? Ideas of reincarnation make sense in a Hindu or Buddhist context, and the Kabbalah offered ways of thinking about what comes after death, but caught in the spiral of events that were leading to the holocaust, it might well have been easier not to think in those terms. The simplicity of the Oedipal triangle does sound like a defence a complex social system where the nuclear family might well have been a place of safety in an increasingly hostile world.

**Conclusion**

Psychoanalysis emerged from western discourse when European colonial powers were at, or just passing, their peak. It’s been taken up in other parts of the world in ways that can sometimes affirm a sense of Western-centredness, but it also has tools within itself to be subversive of itself and look a little beyond, mobilising the capacity to be with unknowing to become part of the way of exploring.

My suggestion is that Freud found in the Oedipus myth a story that helped him articulate his experience of sex and sexuality. Rather than criticising him for being too narrow, or trying too hard to universalise him, there is something of value in looking at his contribution as a “worked example” of how someone might navigate this territory, which carries an invitation to look at how other might do the same which offers a way of bringing some of what is foreclosed into the domain of what can be engaged with.

**References**


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