

## **“BLACK HAMLET”: A PSYCHOANALYST DESTRANGERS A STRANGER**

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### **Abstract.**

First published in 1937, Wulf Sachs' **Black Hamlet** remains topical and controversial. It is an unconventional case-history of nearly 300 pages and a social document. A European psychoanalyst and an uneducated African healer-diviner met and strived to understand one another emotionally and socially. To a remarkable extent they succeeded. In **Black Hamlet** Sachs probed how individuals came to experience one another as individuals despite personal, social and cultural obstacles. Sachs was both a psychoanalyst and a socialist activist and he asked such questions as: How do individuals come to trust one another? How do they reach one another emotionally despite their personal narcissisms and those of their cultures? **Black Hamlet** is a book of frankly expressed impressions that suggests that strangers may be less strange than one expected, feared or was led by one's society to believe. The strangeness or otherness of other individuals is not beyond our personal or professional awareness. Winnicott in his **Playing and reality** has shown how "cultural experience has not found its true place in the theory used by analysts in their work and in their thinking" (Winnicott, 2002:xi). Consequently the complex relationships between psychic reality (the internal or personal) and the socio-cultural setting has been neglected. Sachs did not neglect these relationships. He boldly applied Freudian insights to a specific socio-cultural setting at a particular historical time. For Sachs, as for Winnicott, the intricate stresses of breaking out of personal and socio-cultural narcissisms to appreciate the individuality of "others" were a central problem for psychoanalysts.

### **BACKGROUND.**

Sachs was born in Russia in 1893 and studied medicine in Russia, Germany and England. In 1922 he emigrated to South Africa with his family, and during the 1920s he worked as a psychiatrist in a mental hospital where he had the opportunity to observe both African and "white" patients. He began daringly to express doubts about the belief that "the native mind" and that of whites were different. He had "discovered that the manifestations of insanity ... are identical in both natives and Europeans .... This discovery made me inquisitive to know if the working fundamentals of the mind in its normal state were not also the same" (Sachs, 1996:71). His psychoanalytic background persuaded him that "only a study into the depths of the human mind, only an acquaintance with the wide range of desires, conflicts, striving, contradictory and confusing, can give an understanding ...." (ibid:71-72), so that he sought an African with whom he could speak freely so that as free associations were forthcoming they could be

analysed. By chance, a sociologist had been studying the yard in which John Chavafambira, Black Hamlet, was living and she called on Sachs to treat Chavafambira's wife. Sachs treated her successfully and he found himself chatting with an "ordinary native man, a witch doctor ... who had lived for a number of years in Johannesburg ... a diviner and herbalist: he told fortunes, luck ... " (ibid:73). One day Sachs chatted with him about diseases as one doctor to another and their on-and-off fifteen year relationship began.

Sachs' book opens with his personal and professional inquisitiveness, and it ends with a frank political statement. It seems to me to integrate imaginatively his psychoanalytic mode of enquiry with his political convictions. Throughout his book Sachs seems aware of the creative tensions between himself an enquirer, and the cultural and social barriers between him and Chavafambira. Sachs was sensitive to the complexities of the relationship, to the dangers of distortion and blindness that are caused by the observer's "masked hostility or unconscious aversion, or ... sentimental idealization and demonstrative friendliness". (ibid:72).

### **PROCEDURE AND PROBLEMS.**

Once Sachs had "begun a conversation with [Chavafambira] on diseases ... speaking to him as one doctor to another ... and when I expressed my willingness to explain the white man's methods of treatment, [Chavafambira's] interest grew" (Sachs, 1996:73). Sachs explained the nature of the unconscious and offered to help Chavafambira to uncover his unconscious, to which Chavafambira "accepted willingly" (ibid:73). It was agreed that Chavafambira would come to Sachs' consulting room daily for an hour, where Sachs mainly used free associations, encouraging Chavafambira to say whatever was on his mind. This continued for two and a half years. Sachs reports that during the first two or three months he was told many lies; for example, Chavafambira denied that he was practising as a doctor, but Sachs accepted that either Chavafambira was afraid of Sachs or he wanted to boast or impress. Sachs became sufficiently trusted to visit many places with Chavafambira, meeting family and friends and confirming what he was told by Chavafambira, and became "astonished ... with the accuracy of his memories, and the truthfulness of most of his descriptions" (ibid: 75).

Sachs wrote down what Chavafambira said "in his actual phrases ... in the broken though fluent English in which [they were] told", so that he can claim that the book "is John's story, unaltered in its essence" (ibid:75). Sachs, however, enters a *caveat*: "the reader may doubt the truth of some of the events related: I often doubted it myself: but a fantasy of the human mind is just as interesting to us as the realities of life, for it gives perhaps even more insight into the nature of the man." (ibid:75).

Here there is a problem. Sachs retold Chavafambira's broken English in "normal" English. There are no reports of misunderstandings or misinterpretations, so we have no idea if Sachs had to deal with them. But in psychoanalysis, as in everyday relationships individuals consciously and unconsciously learn about their personal and cultural communicative insensitivities, and learn to be sensitive to the emotional background noise.

What was the emotional background noise that might have interfered with these intimate conversations? We can only speculate. One possible noise was, surely, the

power aspects of the relationships. Sachs was white and Chavafambira was African. To what extent was Sachs able to offset his identity as a white man in white-dominated society? To what extent did Sachs and Chavafambira offset their otherness for one another? The two men soon after they met began to mean something to one another. It seems that Sachs was unusually sensitive to Chavafambira's initial wariness and subtly transformed it into curiosity and gradually into trust.

It has been noted that Sachs did not explicitly analyse transference and counter-transference (Yates, 1938:251), and this leads to editor Dubow's "unanswered and possibly unanswerable questions: ... whose story is this? Who is transformed, and by whom?" (Sachs, 1996:32). One answer is that both Sachs and Chavafambira were transformed. It is, I feel, unimaginable that they could not have transformed one another during so long-lasting a relationship in so dangerous a society, Sachs was aware of his changed and changing relationship with Chavafambira, and towards the end of the book he confesses that "I tried for the first time to see John the human being and not the subject of psycho-analytic studies .... In spite of my sympathy and external freedom in relationship with him, he nevertheless had remained chiefly a psycho-anthropological specimen: the main aim had been to collect his dreams, his fantasies, and find out the workings of the primitive unconscious mind" (ibid:287).

However, during the second two thirds of the book, Sachs describes his increasing involvement with Chavafambira, his family and friends, and it is more and more difficult for the reader to separate Sachs' role as "investigator" from his energetic cooperation in solving social problems that very rarely resulted from Chavafambira's idiosyncratic reaction to his social and political situation. Towards the end of the book, for example, Sachs declares that "what I have to relate now about John's life is so interrelated with the general condition of life in South Africa that I cannot with impunity do so in the straight-forward manner that I have hitherto employed .... After a close acquaintance with John my interests were not confined to him, but spread to the whole community" (ibid:259). Chavafambira was once involved in a murder case and it was unsafe for him to stay in Johannesburg. Sachs found him a safe hiding place until he could be driven home to Rhodesia. Sachs and Chavafambira had to have reached a deep level of mutual trust and understanding for either to have trusted the other in a situation that was dangerous for both of them.

### **TOWARDS A SOCIALLY ARTICULATE PSYCHOANALYSIS.**

In **Black Hamlet** readers are empowered to share the lives, identities and internal conflicts with which Sachs and Chavafambira had to cope. The book is, essentially, an early study of the interactions of two othernesses: otherness created both by individual idiosyncrasies and histories and by socio-cultural circumstances. It reveals that lives and identities were possible, and what were impossible for Sachs and Chavafambira, and how both men felt gradually freer to open up their feelings to one another. At first Sachs was uncertain about his relationship with Chavafambira, because: "I was struck by the fact of how little John, throughout his life, gave himself a chance of thinking out a problem for himself and making his own decision. Always his mother or his father came to his help" (ibid:87). Was Sachs in danger of being identified as another mother or father? He never mentions this possibility, but as their relationship develops Sachs becomes more supportive, materially and emotionally, more motherly, more fatherly.

**Black Hamlet** is, I feel, Sachs' unconscious denial of otherness, and reveals "both an identification with, and a (mirrored) separation from Chavafambira and other black people" (Hayes, 2002:46).

Sachs was not directly concerned with broad theoretical issues, but his book anticipates Hartmann's and Erikson's Ego psychology and Object-relations theory. Sachs grew steadily more sensitive to the emotional stresses of Chavafambira's social world and to how an African was coping with the imposed, arbitrary identities and identifications of his society. Chavafambira's world was, to a sensitive man a maze of othernesses in which to develop a stable Ego was difficult. Not surprisingly Chavafambira confesses: "If only he could instil by some magic some superhuman powers into his people! He would lead them to rise and fight ... smash the whole white superstructure that places such bitter and intolerable burdens upon the black man." (ibid:252).

Erikson comments that "the conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the immediate perception of one's self-sameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others recognise one's sameness and continuity" (Erikson, 1994:22). Sachs was concerned with the damage done to one's sense of self-sameness and continuity if a racist society insists that one is different, and if the only permitted continuity is that one is stigmatised, demeaned, rejected and never permitted to feel settled. Sachs shows a Chavafambira who becomes strong enough to fight for his own identity as John Chavafambira. In a society as passionately politicised as South Africa was (and is still?), it is immensely difficult to disentangle the influence of the political on the personal in psychoanalysis.

A psychoanalyst who now repeated Sachs' study would probably explore the subtle "relations between identity and difference. How am I wholly and unmistakably myself? How am I part of the mass, similar to or the same as others?" (Samuels, 1993:8). Further: How do I interpret and evaluate my samenesses and differences? What do I feel about them? How do my interpretations and feelings influence what I do, dream about and fantasise? How do my culture and society impose samenesses and permit differences collectively and on individuals? These questions are at the heart of any phenomenological psychoanalysis, because such a psychoanalysis probes how and why individuals experience themselves and their world – a world that is both "real" and a fantasy idiosyncratically created. The psychoanalytic attitude of **Black Hamlet** is suffused with Sachs' sensitivity to the emotional and socio-political worlds of Chavafambira, his family and his friends.

Editors Dubow and Rose criticise Sachs slightly, implying that he failed to separate psychological from socio-political issues. For example, Dubow writes that "Liberals like Hellman or Sachs, who sought to establish a common society in South Africa, tended to take a sanguine view of the interaction between African and Western cultures" (ibid:15), and were anxious about the possible effects of "detrribalization". Sachs was no liberal but a socialist, and was politically and psychologically sufficiently sophisticated to accept both Chavafambira's ambivalence about whites generally and Sachs specifically. On the last pages Sachs discusses with Chavafambira and others how to handle the future with a new attitude to life that would give an educated African class something to look forward to, a strength to oppose racist repression.

**Black Hamlet** is “redolent with phrases and questions which point to Sachs’s search for ‘the truth’ of who he is”, and that suggest that “the identification of Sachs with Chabafambira is unconsciously structured by Sachs’s need for the social acceptance of his otherness” (Hayes, 2002:45). The “his” is ambiguous, and is not often openly examined as a complication of a socially sensitive psychoanalysis. The participants in analysis are “other” to one another, but both need to accept the other if the analysis is to make progress, and both participants must succeed to disentangle themselves from their webs of interpersonal fantasy if they are to “see” one another.

More temperately than Fanon and as insightful as Said, Sachs fostered a black-white relationship and showed that black-white relationships need not be conflictual nor empty of mutual understanding and sympathy. Even in a racist society stereotypes can be shattered and racist norms, mistrust and anger can be partly, or wholly, neutralised with the aid of psychoanalytic insight. Africans and non-Africans lived within fantasy worlds and collectively projected onto one another unconscious fears and repressed fascination. Sachs only hints at the economic, political and social forms that would have to change if collective fantasies were to dissolve. He implies that the vehement ambivalence of African/Non-African relationships can only be modified as individuals emerge from collective stereotypes and thus emotional space is formed in which spontaneous identifications can be formed.

Sachs accomplished what the most narrowly orthodox analysis attempts: he shattered two individuals’ constructs of “me”, “you” and “them” and developed a relationship in which both individuals became emotionally free with one another, despite social and political constraints. A joint experience was formed in which Sachs and Chavafambira each knew himself more intimately and knew more intimately the other. We are emotionally invisible to one another unless we can share our experience of one another’s experiences of each other. Sachs’ example convincingly shows how even in a hostile social setting individuals can reach one another emotionally. It is foolish (and contrary to a socially sensitive psychoanalysis) to maintain the “politically correct” myth that because Chavafambira was African and poorly educated and Sachs was white and highly educated, that they were so bound within socio-political constraints that one has to be suspicious of the book’s dramatic breaking through those constraints.

It is undeniable that identifications and empathetic relationships do develop regardless of cultural, sexual, age (and many other) economic, political and social obstacles. These identifications may be negative or positive and are often fantastic, but they are rarely predictable. In his “Mourning and melancholia” Freud (1917) describes identification as a substitute for a lost human relationship. It can also be a substitute for a relationship that an individual yearns for but has never had. I, for example, was a substitute father for three deprived Xhosa youngsters who had never had a father. Who for one another were Sachs and Chavafambira? We never know. Freud also observed that a positive identification may be an “expression of a [sense of] community which may signify love” (Freud, 1917:161). In **Black Hamlet** the ambiguities and the emotional richness of the relationship have created a richness of understanding and empathy – of “love” – that few more narrowly empirical clinical studies achieve.

## **CONCLUSION.**

It is time that Sachs' innovative study was appreciated by socially aware psychoanalysts and allied professionals. The collective narcissism imposed upon Sachs and Chavafambira was strikingly neutralised. It has been argued that the "narcissistic prejudices are prejudices of boundary establishment .... On the other side of the narcissists' boundaries there is not a 'them', a 'not-us', but a blank, a lack – or at the most, a profound mystery" (Young-Bruehl, 1998:35). Sachs showed that it *is* possible to dispel the socially imposed mystery to disclose the hidden individual with the aid of psychoanalytic enquiry and empathy. Cultures, societies and individuals are an intricate mosaic of attitudes, values, perceptions, fantasies and habitual ways of living. Chavafambira was neither simply "westernised", "detrified" nor "urbanised". He was himself, living his own interpretations and responses to imposed social identities.

Sachs' writing implies a criticism of two methodological errors. One error is to overstate culture and society as strangeness, almost or fully impenetrable to an outsider. This error diverts many social scientists from even trying to appreciate individual psychodynamics. The other error is to be so caught up in the intriguing questions about individual uniqueness, the idiosyncratic styles of dealing with cultural and social opportunities and constraints that the interactions between individuals and their social worlds are ignored or minimised.

The heuristic value of **Black Hamlet** should not be neglected. As long as "psychoanalysis is ... concerned with emotional activity of which we are unaware, it is concerned with activities that occurs between people, which we do not know about, and, even more, with that which occurs within the frontiers of the self, or which we are unaware" (Symington, 1998:44). **Black Hamlet** goes far, and almost uniquely, towards revealing the otherwise "unaware", private yet interacting worlds of two explorers of those worlds, who although they were separated by their cultures and societies, were united by their common humanity.

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