

## Family murder, violence and the South African psyche

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"A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego." (Freud S, 1921, Being in love and hypnosis, in **Group Psychology**).

On June 17, the Grobler family of Jeffrey's Bay were watching television. Mr Petrus Grobler (29) answered the telephone only to be informed that he had lost an important building contract. He went through to the lounge, told his wife and two sons to say goodbye - they kissed, following which he killed the three of them with a shotgun. He then attempted suicide himself. He said "his family meant everything to him".

What began in 1983 as a relatively isolated phenomenon, with around ten people being involved, has increased with such dramatic rapidity that around sixty people died as a result of family murder in 1987, while around twenty died in 1988. The fact that it is virtually an unheard of phenomenon overseas and the fact that over 80% of all family murders are committed by Afrikaans speaking white South Africans, has necessitated that serious investigations into causal factors be undertaken. The aim of this paper will be to outline the psychodynamic factors which make this phenomenon such a uniquely South African one. In using a psychodynamic approach we hope to avoid reproducing yet another "over socialised conception of humans" (Wrong, in Bocock, 1983). We hope to

provide the reader with a psychodynamic understanding of family dynamics within the South African context.

## METHODOLOGY.

Most of the existing studies on family murder (van Arkel, 1988; Pretorius, 1987; Luttig, 1985) have been predominantly of a descriptive nature with a measure of explanation that locates the phenomenon socially, culturally and politically. Their efforts at explanation have been based to a large extent on what can be termed common sense notions and theories about family murders. (To the best of our knowledge, no work exists which situates family murders in a sound psychodynamic framework). Pretorius (1987) argues that the cause of family murders is a mistaken sense of responsibility while Du Toit (1988) sees the acceptance of beskikkingsreg (1) as the major factor. Finally, van Arkel (1988) believes that Christianity which plays a major role within a Christian culture, alongside the death of Christ, is seen as a solution to problems (Pretorius, 1987 p39). In this regard, the view of death which the person holds is important. The fact that many people believe that, following death, they will be reunited with loved ones, in a place free of pain and sadness which is indicative of their life on earth, makes the option of death more favourable. None of these theories provide a sound psychodynamic explanation as to the underlying causal mechanisms operative in a family murder.

In any investigation of a phenomenon such as family murders the problem of analytically fusing the often contradictory notions of intrapsychic factors, family dynamics and social forces is an immense one. We wish to argue that a re-reading of what is subversive and dialectical in Freud and Jung, in particular an understanding of the collective "unconscious (2) as structured in the most radical way like language", can be seen as a bridge between intrapsychic dynamics and the process of family functioning (Muller & Richardson, 1982, p2). The interface between intrapsychic dynamics and family systems are these structural laws by which experiences are transformed into "living myths" (what Lacan refers to as metonymy, metaphor and mathemes).

Our methodological approach is that "... theory is not a literal translation or reflection of reality, but its symptom, its metaphorical account. The myth is not pure fantasy, however, but has a narrative symbolic logic that accounts for a real structure of relations ..... Between reality and the psychoanalytic myth, the relation is not one of opposition, but one of



analytic dialogue: the myth comes to grips with something in reality that it does not fully comprehend but which it gives an answer, a symbolic reply ... The myth is structurally truthful and psychoanalytically effective, not just in function of but in proportion to its capacity for narrative expropriation." (Felman, 1987, pp151-153).

To understand family murders we need to read the event as "overdetermined" (3) and exaggerated, narrated as both "text" and "case study" (Jay, 1984, p90). Case study engages the reader in the interrelation of both intrapsychic and interpersonal complexes. The language, symbols, mythologies, archetypes and images of the text enters the reader into the narrative and dialogue the text provides. A guide and illumination from "within" and on the text's own terms - "letting the phenomena speak for itself".

In a psychodynamic approach using a structuralist Freudian and Jungian reading of "the interpretation of the unconscious" the question is asked whether Freud and Jung can once again exist as strange but workable bedfellows. The relation between Freud and Jung's work has been the subject of a longstanding controversy, and is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss (see for example, Glover, 1950; Eissler, 1971; Kaufmann, 1980; Storr, 1983). However, we shall adapt the stance that as a "structural interpretative science" (4), what the work of Freud and Jung can contribute should be stressed and not overlooked due to "bad faith". As Bettelheim provocatively remarks, " .. one may hope that the various psychoanalytical movements come to realise that they have more in common than differences. As with Freud and Jung, differences originate more often in the vagaries of complicated personal relations and ambivalence than in genuine theoretical disagreements, although it is these that are stressed, in order to hide the all too human personal biases that are behind them." (in Carotenuto, p.xxxix).

## TEXT.

In the present South African context, the traditional and "normal" boundaries between family members, have either strengthened or blurred/disintegrated. With increased social upheaval and violence many white families experience a heightened sense of paranoia and fear, and as a result, the boundaries between the family unit and society at large are strengthened. Accompanying this process is a withdrawal and isolation from the wider social reality and a blurring or disintegration of the

boundaries between and amongst the families's subgroups as a result of continuous dependence on, and enmeshment with, one another. Consequently, a likely scenario is that of the white parent who begins to conceive of his/her family as simply being an extension of him/herself and the subsequent family murder in this context is, in a symbolic sense, an extended suicide. No meaningful, cognitive separation exists between murderer and murdered.

As has already been stated, the original forces in the family's initial closing in on itself are the wider societal forces. The resulting "closed" nature of the family system however, by no means precluded it from further external influence/interaction. To elaborate the textual process of how a national/cultural level becomes translated at a personal level, an archetypal/mythical analysis is useful.

At the onset, it must be stated that a distinction will be made between myths which assist in explaining the choice of a family murder as a viable option to what is seen as an oppressive situation, and those myths which, while not explaining the actual murder, go a long way in setting up the context within which a family murder becomes a possibility.

As regards the latter, the Teutonic myth of Wotan is of most use. Wotan was known as the god of storm and frenzy, predominated in the middle ages, but thought to have been outgrown. It next "came to life" in the Hitler Youth Movement, and Jung used it to explain the rapid development of National Socialism in Germany, prior to the Second World War. Jung argued that the disturbances in the German consciousness could not be ascribed to the personal unconscious but were rather more deeply located in the Wotanic contamination of the father archetype (Progroff, 1953; Stevens, 1982). As a result of the rigidly patriarchal and Ehrfurcht (honour-fear) nature of German society (paralleled amongst many white South Africans) the dynamic aspects of this myth were repressed (Stevens, 1982, p122). An additional factor in the repression was the fact that Christendom considered the myth to be satanic and proceeded to split the Barbarian (Wotan) into upper and lower parts, domesticating the upper sphere to fit in with civilisation, while simultaneously repressing the lower part (Jung, CW 10). In this process of repression, because the forces of order are not intergrated, there is the potential for a dangerous accumulation of the forces of disorder. Symbols of this process are state violence and totalitarianism.



"As is always the case with repressed material, it does not disappear", and "The lower, darker half still awaits redemption and a second spell of domestication .... as the Christian view of the world loses its authority, the more menacingly will the 'blond beast' be heard prowling about in its underground prison, ready at any moment to burst out with devastating consequences." (Jung, CW10, para 17). The eruption of accumulated repressed material occurs in a violent and destructive manner with little of no reference to consciousness (Progroff, 1953).

In analysing the South African scenario - with the rigidly patriarchal and nationalistic nature of white society, the penetrative power of the NG Kerk, the State's policy of apartheid and privileged interest groups, enforcement of separate interest groups through ideology, security legislation, military action, hostility against neighbouring states and cross border raids etc - deep cutting parallels with Nazi Germany and Stalin's Gulag are evident. The deep rumbling of Wotan with its migratory soul, finds roots in the South African authoritarian soil which promotes the "heroic" pursuit and return to Uroboric state of being.

A Uroboric state of being is a state of non-differentiation and results in an impasse in which the "hero" is tied to the "Great Mother" but unable to acknowledge the bondage. The hero becomes arrested in a circular and repetitive process caught in an incestuous web of seduction and revulsion. This process repeats itself in the patriarchal structures of the Zeus-Hera type marriage (Saayman et al, 1988). It is a forced marriage achieved through disguise, rape and shame: "(Hera) took pity on him only when he adopted the disguise of a bedraggled cuckoo, and tenderly warmed him in her bosom. There he at once resumed his true shape and ravished her, so that she was shamed into marrying him" (Graves, 1955, p50).

The white South African male believes he has rights of ownership and control over others (woman, children, blacks, and so on) which he believes are part of the interlinking hierarchies of authority (family, school, university, work environment, army). The white South African male identifies himself as a superman connected to a chosen and superior race and as a superman/hero he is "unable to die" - unable to bear the "cross" of separation. In reaction to frustration of his omnipotent fantasies and manic delirium the individual is involved in violent projection and regression under the influence of his shadow. What Jung refers to as the "regressive restoration of the persona".

In this state of imbalance (loss of soul), contamination, blurring and merging of a constellation of archetypal images takes place whose aim it is to restore the pact with the "night-sun" - the divine mission to rule over the weak. In identifying with his persona his "social unconscious" (Fromm) becomes inconspicuous and submerged with the ideals the "race" professes to be guided by. With fanaticism and a fatalistic conformity the individual persona attempts to become part of the collective dogma.

The identification gives a precarious sense of permanence but needs to order reality so as to restore the Uroboric state of being. In this process of selective vision and "restoration of law and order" the individual is compelled to go on interfering with reality for each solution creates more problems to be solved. Like Adonis the individual is unable to heed the wisdom of counsel. He is destined to be at war with the beast within due to unacknowledged narcissistic symbiosis with the "Great Mother".

A family murder is in a bizarre sense an act of love, one of aggression turned inward, onto the self. Wotan, a manifestation of the patriarchal father, finds his kinship to be based on the old order of love. A situation in which Zeus and Hera, like their father Cronus before, devour and attempt to control that which expresses differentiation - that which breaks one into two and two into three. It is an attempt to restore the taboo against awareness, a taboo Psychi broke in casting light upon the hidden "beast", pricking the insulated reality with the inflamed desire to know and love. The taboo is a "masculine" rejection and denial of Psychi's quest - to learn how to understand Eros while retaining her individuality.

### **CONTENT AND PROCESS - A CASE STUDY.**

Having presented the text it is now important to outline the content.

"The white royal road" is linked to the process which has masked the unconscious. The process, when unmasked, is seen to be based on the attempt at absolute method, that is, an ideology based on relations of domination and white interests. Any attempt at an "absolute method" is a process without a subject (5). This means that the subject can only be understood at the level of omission, the extent to which the white South African is not an expression of his/her own individual nature but of the nature of party policy. This is seen in the relations of production and other political and ideological relations.



This closed system could be referred to as the "white asylum" - what Adorno refers to as an "administered world". As with any capitalist system a degree of bureaucratic and institutional living occurs. When the dominant institutions entrench themselves, institutionalisation becomes the norm. This entrenchment manifests the deception that the whites depend solely on themselves for their power. The greater the attempt to eliminate all resistance, to establish this deception as the norm, the stronger the suggestion of the possibility of whites having unlimited power.

The more powerful the whites feel (in their terms, less limited) the more intolerable any limitation feels. The paradox is that in attempting to maintain an exclusive identity whites have had to define themselves against another, and have created a narcissistic illusion that identity can be structured through being the "desire of the other" (that place from which the other desires). The result is a "primary identification that structures the subject as a rival with himself" creating paranoid hostility (Lacan, 1977, p22). This projective defence aims to keep destructive impulses towards loved ones, peers and self repressed.

It is the attempt at absolute power which limits the individual, for he/she cannot distinguish his/her identity from "THE OTHER" (6). Put another way, the extent of this dependency on "THE OTHER" (taken to be the symbolic order) is the extent to which he/she experiences an incompleteness, the lack he/she feels compelled to fill. The whites, due to feeling incomplete have allied themselves with Nationalist ideology so as to attempt to gain and secure the belief in authority, protection and absolute power.

White South Africans have become that which negates them, that which they cannot cope with, for any attempt to limit basic human nature, is to deny the desire of the unconscious, and to be swallowed up by that desire. Frustration which results, is as a result of an over emphasis on nationalist "logos" - an arrogant, brutal and dominant form of "fathering", the male authoritative order. In terms of pathology, it is a collective neurosis - fixated to an obsessive compulsive need to control and force "order" (i.e the SA Defence Force is a magnified form of obsessive compulsive behaviour evident in the wider society).

The ideology of white domination is one crystallised around certain pillars. Three central pillars can be delineated: A triangular conflict.

1. Inferiority/superiority; active/passive - "Images of Fragmentation" - AMBIVALENCE;
2. Violence and male brutality - "Foreclosure" - PATHOLOGY;
3. Taboos and legislation - COMPLEX.

The constituent elements of this disorder can be seen in so-called white culture - WHITE PHALLUS (Calvinistic race theology, apartheid laws, rugby, paranoid fear of homosexuality, and so on). For example, rugby has a mode of signification unique to white South Africans. A month prior to the white election, South African society was beset by violent police action against protest groups. Despite this situation, white English-speaking "liberal" newspapers in Cape Town had more to say about the forthcoming rugby test with the entire front page devoted to rugby news. Why? Rugby has taken on a symbolic mythical meaning. Demystified rugby is the phallic display of insecure white males who are afraid of all that they associate with being female, in particular intimacy. It is a form of sexual acting out to compensate for impotency, castration, fear. An internalised guilt of patricide and an overly erotic identification with the dead father (7). As long as South Africa can beat the world's best, they are still the strongest.

The other constituent element of the "white phallus" is white violence towards black people and the manifestation of that violence. The white laager, in attempting to ensure a voiceless, unrepresented cheap black labour force have broken down, fragmented, disintegrated and annihilated primary subsistence and emotional facets of black life.

One reaction to this is the tyre-necklace (a circle) which is a slow burning away of forces that the laager (closed circle) have co-opted. Another reaction is "black on black" violence (ideologically referred to as "tribal conflict"). This class conflict is the desperate attempt to gain status and a voice of representation. Symbolically an attempt to have their cry acknowledged due to the fact that for the majority of black people their cry has been down-played as less than human and one not worth responding to. To avoid swallowing the loss, (symbolised by the empty mouth), some blacks take on the words and roles ascribed by the status quo, whilst others identify their entire existence with the words of the struggle (8). "Amandla" becomes THE WORD.

In the struggle of the blacks who wishes to break the bond of "master - slave" the attempt is to create a society which is ungovernable. This



disorder in South Africa has created a society of "mirrors" - illusion/reality, intera/externa, projection/incorporation - which become indistinguishable images. To armour himself/herself against the images of fragmentation ("castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body", Benvenuto & Kennedy, 1986, p57) the whites attempt to build a fortress around the introjection, identification and idealisation of the "ideal".

To keep this lack at bay a chain of signifying symbols are developed to displace the tension/conflict elsewhere. When all else fails, (the links of the signifying chain begin to break), there is the last resort of psychosis and suicide. "Turning to psychosis, one may see a 'foreclosure' (in Freud *Verwerfung*), or a complete failure to recognise symbolic castration and the name-of-the-father, which results in profound disturbances in the symbolic order" (Benvenuto & Kennedy, 1986, p135).

#### **THE WHITE SOUTH AFRICAN OEDIPUS COMPLEX.**

"Contemporaneously with this 'devotion' of the ego to the object, which is no longer to be distinguished from a sublimated devotion to an abstract idea, the functions allotted to the ego ideal entirely cease to operate. The criticism exercised by that agency is silent, everything that the object does and asks for is right and blameless. Conscience has no application to anything that is done for the sake of the object; in the blindness of love remorselessness is carried to the pitch of crime. The whole situation can be completely summarized in a formula: THE OBJECT HAS BEEN PUT IN THE PLACE OF THE EGO IDEAL." (Freud, 1921, Being in love and Hypnosis, in *Group Psychology*).

A tentative hypothesis for the above could be that at the time of so-called Oedipal separation, the loss which occurs is not filled by his/her actual father but by the BIG FATHER (state). Society enters the individual as s/he enters the world of symbolic speech, the pre-structured relations. What the father does is to merely act as a catalyst for the logos of state. The violent way authority (ideology) replaces the child's emotions with the ethics of the state (BIG FATHER), leaves the child's emotional nature immature and empty - in a state of repetition (DESTRUCTIVE DRIVE - return of the repressed).

This "new structuring" is not an abrupt happening but a merging of the symbolic roles of mother and father. The WHITE MOTHERS OF THE

NATION are absorbed in dependency relationships with their children, characterised by their own ambivalence to gender symbols. (In a society in which "female traits" are classified as negative and opposite to "male traits", in which macho-ism and "female passivity" are highly esteemed, mothering becomes structured by pre-existing white patriarchal social constraints).

The woman/mother's ambivalence results in a rejection of that which is seen as "female" (weak) and valuing of that which is seen as "white patriarchal" (powerful). Males come to be those who have access to and represent the important social resources, whilst females construct their identity in terms of the ability to identify with the needs of others (in particular males). Women's sexuality becomes identified with the satisfaction of male sexual needs. So saying, the actual interaction of THE MOTHERS OF THE NATION cannot escape the SYMBOLIC STRUCTURES which help define those interactions. What Chodorow would refer to as the internalisation of social relations that govern parenting, in particular what society teaches to be "good enough parenting".

The child's internal representations (Imaginary order) are confused further with his/her interaction with a powerless caring significant other, the female black domestic. The definition of her role as servant gives her a limited and empty voice as a person. She finds herself, as does the child, helpless victim to the child's feelings of omnipotence, frustration and terror.

The negative and inferior role of females, (as delineated by the symbolic order), undermines the care and support the significant other provides. In being unable to contain destructive phantasies the mother/parent - child boundary becomes confused. Feelings of intimacy become feared and the BIG FATHER comes to be seen as the heroic, all-powerful saviour, to lift the child into adulthood out of the so-called emotional mess. Yet the NAME OF THE FATHER (in its true form of castration) is never expressed.

It is naive, however, to write off the whites as monsters as the process manifests itself in a subtle manner. Generally speaking, whites may be considered a collective type, with their emotional being impoverished, and worse still, not in control of their life, but controlled by that part of the unconscious which constitutes the "gaze of the other" (ideology).



Whilst this may be the case, even in the most authoritarian of people or institutions (eg. the army), basic humanness can exist - they are at times kind, caring and loving people. Thus the unconscious process of the whites manifests itself in the form of a split identity, one of humanness and one of introjection of the Big Father with all its racist and fascist implications. There exists a tension between brutal authoritarianism and what small degree of humanity is retained. This lack of "balance" is evident in human relationships which tend towards control and patronisation.

The unholy mix of "human nature" and "state nature", with "state nature" being the dominant, causes ideology (state policy) to be experienced as natural, as part of human nature. Ideology imprints itself upon human development making itself indistinguishable from those libidinal elements that are "instinctive" (9). These "instinctive" drives would normally be attached to an imaginary order which express the desire of "great refusal" in separating from jouissance. The BIG FATHER and MOTHER OF THE NATION, upholds a mirror image of completeness (omnipotence) to the child who gives up her/his desire anticipation of completeness.

The person who is emotionally impoverished in this manner cannot (does not want to) imagine anything other than this symbolic order, to which s/he has given his/her desire. Anything contrary is either ignored or else transformed into this "consistent world picture". The tension associated with this process is a fear of that which is unknown (reality) and experienced as an empty void. It is the projections onto others and actual situations ie black protests, which s/he cannot transform into his/her world picture which heightens this already existing tension/emptiness.

In the family murder, the individual lacks resources to accommodate and assimilate this tension/emptiness. Put another way, it is the "tension of reality", which cannot be wished into the symbolic order. This tension, experienced as a mixture of ambiguous emotions, is felt as an attack to the core (lack of core). The illusion of absolute power folds in on itself and as a defence devours itself.

The act of killing the family reflects the wish that that which s/he loves and desires must remain intact. Loyalty unto death. The family murder is suicide before disillusionment - infantile rage (terror) that this white South African bourgeois ideal is not omnipotent.

## CONCLUSION.

"We know in fact what ravages a falsified filiation can produce, going as far as the dissociation of the subject's personality, when the constraint of his entourage is used to sustain the lie" (Lacan, 1977, p67).

Apartheid/racism is sick, it brutalises, perverts, distorts and traumatises. We are at present witness to the obscenities and vicious explosions of this disturbance. What we witness and what is exposed does no more than reveal that which is already there - fissures and division which already exist. How much the violence is "tribal", a result of enforced government separation and conscious manipulation of perhaps "tenuous" divisions, the hidden third hand, and how much is the expression of years of brutal oppression, we do not know.

The present text of South Africa is the Promethean will-to-power, one of fire and rebirth. "Pandora's dilemma, the floods, to profane the remains of our ancestors ..." are some of the painful paradoxes that the (damaged) white psyche need to work through so as to find "symbols of transformation" which avoid the violent metaphor of the family murder and its inter-relatedness to the violence at large.

## Notes.

1. The Afrikaans term "beskikkingsreg" will be used in this discussion as there is no adequate English translation of the word. Broadly, it means the acceptance of the right to decide on the lives of others.

2. "Collective unconscious" means for us that "there is just one unconscious which is indistinguishable in individuals and in groups in the way it works. There are collective unconscious elements in individuals, especially in the superego. And there are individual unconscious processes at work in group leaders." (Bocock, 1983, p129). Whether or not the collective unconscious can be related to an "archaic heritage" or a "reservoir of unknown inborn, primordial, a priori experiences of mankind, beyond the conceivable known and dualism of rationality/irrationality" is an anthropological, evolutionist and metaphysical question, that is, Kant's categories, Bergson's pure duration, Feuerbach's eclectic humanism, Husserl's absolute in infinity, infinite telos, and so on. We are not prepared to



embrace this question but instead focus on those aspects which lead to a social theory. For a different reading of the collective unconscious and social theory see Saayman, Faber and Saayman (1988).

3. "What is necessary is that it should 'fuse' (fusionner) with other contradictions in a unity which provokes radical change. This unity of fused contradictions reveals its own nature, which is that contradiction is inseparable from its conditions of existence and from the moments, or instances, it governs. Determining and determined by the various levels and moments of the social formation, contradiction is therefore 'overdetermined'." (Kelly, 1982, p127).

4. Steele (1982) in advocating hermeneutics as a science of interpretation emphasised Jung's use of textual analyses and Freud's use of case studies.

5. For a more detailed discussion with reference to this concept of "absolute method" see:

(a) Marx, K *The poverty of philosophy*, p200, in Marx, K & Engels, F (1976) *Collected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

(b) Althusser, L (1982) *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*. London: Verso, pp182-186.

(c) Adorno, T W (1982) *Against epistemology*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp9-17.

6. Identity is structured and the psyche organised through the medium of white nationalistic cultural categories - a total symbolic network of systems and sub-systems.

7. The dead father is the colonialist tradition that the "boers" inherit (and erect as totems) from the British (i.e Glen Grey Act becomes the 1913 Land Act).

8. To avoid "swallowing the loss" (symbolised by the empty mouth) the baby howls and cries and by so doing "makes things appear". This process of making sounds results in the breast-filled mouth being replaced by the word-filled mouth. What happens when the baby cries and nothing fills its mouth, nothing appears? (Harper & Ntisme, 1990).

9. The "Affective, passionate elements which modifies the subjects relation to reality" becomes more or less exclusively attached to white ideology, reorganising his/her perceptions in which the "ego" is captivated and alienated "by this reality". "An obsessive, over-estimated internal

representation is formed around the object which justifies the subjects inner state." (Green, 1986, p223).

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