

## THE OEDIPUS MYTH AND AFRICAN SACRED KINGSHIP

Lowell Edmunds

In his published writings, Freud never mentions Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, a tragedy that contains material integral to the ancient Oedipus myth but inapplicable to the Oedipus Complex.<sup>1</sup> In this tragedy, the blind and aged Oedipus, led by his daughter, Antigone, reaches Colonus, a town near Athens, and stumbles into a grove of the Erinyes, or Furies, which is to be his final resting-place. Here he is destined to become a sort of tutelary spirit of Athens. In terms of ancient Greek religion, he becomes the object of a hero-cult.<sup>2</sup> This exaltation of Oedipus makes little sense from the point of view of the Oedipus Complex, the overcoming of which leads to normality at best.

It is immediately obvious that the Freudian interpretation of the ancient Oedipus myth is inadequate, since it simply omits a whole section of the narrative. This concluding section was not, furthermore, invented by Sophocles. The redemption and final exaltation of Oedipus were not of his making. According to *Odyssey* 11.271-80, Oedipus lived on as king of Thebes after the discovery of his crimes, and in *Illiad* 23.677-80, it is implied that he died in battle (so he would not have been blind) and stated that he received the signal honor of funeral games (cf. Hesiod frags. 192-3 Merkelbach-West).<sup>3</sup> Funeral games and hero-cult are not the same thing, but both are forms of veneration to which Oedipus, guilty though he is of incest and parricide, is entitled at death.

The connection, then, between the crimes and the later exaltation of Oedipus was not Sophocles' invention, and therefore literary criticism of *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* could tell us at most—

though this would be a great deal—what Sophocles' understanding of the connection was. The problem belongs ultimately not to literary criticism but to mythology.

The comparative approach to the Oedipus myth is justified, then, by the inadequacy of the psychoanalytic interpretation (no matter what the truth of the Oedipus Complex *for us*) and by the shortcomings of the structuralist interpretation.<sup>4</sup> For mythology, the Oedipus myth is still an open question.

The comparison of the Oedipus myth with sacred kingship in Africa will explain the significance and interrelation of some of the myth's principal elements and will suggest that the myth as a whole is one of sacred kingship.

Sacred kingship can probably be divided into two main types, one in which the king is a god or is the god's agent on earth, and another in which the king is a human who acquires supernatural or magical power through heroic exploits and/or incest, while the divine king's impersonation of the deity is provided for in the very concept, and in the symbols and rituals, of the kingship.<sup>5</sup>

Since Africa is so rich in examples of sacred kingship, some of them even contemporary or nearly so, it provides an excellent basis for the comparison proposed here. But, by the same token, African sacred kingship raises many questions of definition. Does the term "sacred kingship" include the chiefs of clans and other such segments? Is the sacred king to be defined by a single, focal custom or ritual? Or by a certain number of criteria in a list of criteria extrapolated from all possible examples of the institution? The answers to these and other such questions are not easy, and at present a definition of sacred kingship that would be accepted by a majority of African experts is probably not to be expected.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, for present purposes, such a definition is unnecessary. The following general-

zations, to which I believe nearly all Africanists would subscribe, are a sufficient basis for the comparison.<sup>7</sup>

In many parts of Africa, there was a sacred king who was identified with his country and was believed to have the magical power to increase the herds and make the crops grow. Therefore, he could not be allowed to decline in office, and would be executed, or voluntarily take his own life, at the first signs of old-age or illness. He thus served as a scapegoat. After his death, he would receive veneration at his grave. As part of the ritual of enthronement, the king engaged in an incestuous union with his mother or sister, usually symbolic, but sometimes actual.<sup>8</sup> He would also have to engage in ritual combat.

This general description of African sacred kingship immediately seems to have implications for the Oedipus myth, but it could well be asked whether the comparison of a mythical narrative with a living or once living political institution is proper. The discrepancy between these two phenomena, myth and institution, is not, however, as great as it might at first appear. African kingship is itself, one could say, a living myth.<sup>9</sup> The function of the rituals surrounding the king is to put him on a higher plane of existence, to sacralize his life, to make of his life a single extended ritual. Kingship is thus not simply a political, administrative, and ceremonial office, but is the sacred center of society, the focus of society's values and beliefs. Kingship has, then, in African society a role that myth had, in large part if not exclusively, amongst the Greeks.

What, then, can African sacred kingship show about the Oedipus myth? The element in the myth that this comparison most helps to elucidate is incest. In Africa, royal incest is part of the enthronement of the new king. Incest, a crime for everyone else, places the king on a higher plane, where he can play his necessary role of intermediary between the forces of nature and his people's welfare. De Heusch has argued that the royal

incest is the archetype of fertility.<sup>10</sup> Inaugurating and consecrating his reign, the king's marriage is a ceremony of renewal, an especially dramatic form, one could say, of the eternal return.

That Oedipus can be the source of a people's well-being is again confirmed in the text of Sophocles. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus learns that the Thebans want to bring him back to Thebes and bury him near the city for the sake of *eusoia* (390). This word, which is rare in Greek literature, is apparently restricted to the health and growth of children. Thebes still has need of Oedipus for the same purpose as when the Sphinx was destroying the city's young men. The second Oedipus tragedy of Sophocles thus makes relatively explicit what was necessarily implicit in the first. In the second tragedy, Oedipus can say to the people of Colonus, "I have come as a sacred one" (287), but he was no less sacred in *Oedipus the King*. The sacredness that he avows in *Oedipus at Colonus* is not the result of suffering or penance—this notion could make sense only in a Christian framework and cannot, I believe, be demonstrated from the text of Sophocles—but attaches to his very crimes. The life of Oedipus was a unity. In the grove of the Furies at Colonus, Oedipus recalls that Apollo "when he prophesied all those ills, spoke of this as my resting place after long years . . . a blessing, dwelling here, to my hosts, a bane on those who sent me forth . . ." (87-93).

This prophecy, which asserts the unity of Oedipus' life, also speaks of the malevolent side of the hero's power. As the source of well-being, he is also the source of its opposite. This ambiguity of the sacred king is well-attested to in African kingship. The Jukun of Nigeria, for example, believed that the king's wrath was terrible: if he flew into a rage and struck the ground, the country would be blighted.<sup>12</sup> In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Apollo's prophecy speaks of Oedipus as a bane on the Thebans, and in this tragedy Oedipus places a curse of

death upon his own sons, who are contending for the kingship of Thebes. He cuts off the descent of his own royal line, brings a kind of barrenness upon himself, and leaves his native city to an uncertain future.

The sacred king's power to curse is not something new in *Oedipus at Colonus*. In the earlier tragedy, Oedipus calls down two curses, one upon the polluter of the city, and the other upon anyone who withholds information concerning the polluter. The second curse is specifically a curse of barrenness and corresponds to the conditions already prevailing during the plague (267-71, cf. 25-7). Oedipus himself is the cause of the plague, and, as such, validates the curse of barrenness, whereas he was once the source of new life.

Fertility and barrenness are the poles of sacred kingship, and the king traverses the axis between them, now benevolent, now a scapegoat, now consecrated again at death. That Oedipus functions as a scapegoat in *Oedipus the King* was demonstrated by Jean-Pierre Vernant, who pointed out similarities between certain elements of the tragedy and the Athenian festival called the Thargelia.<sup>13</sup> At this festival, the Athenians still in the fifth century expelled a scapegoat chosen from amongst the citizens, and Sophocles' tragedy showed them a king serving this function.

The comparison of African sacred kingship with the Oedipus myth thus shows the connection between earlier crimes, banishment, and final exaltation to the status of hero. These events belong to the pattern of sacred kingship. So does regicide, although the coincidence of parricide and regicide is not paralleled in Africa. Finally, one can suggest that Oedipus' self-blinding corresponds to the African king's voluntarily taking his own life. Oedipus connects his self-blinding with the first of the two curses in *Oedipus the King*: he says that he has no wish to behold with his eyes "either the citadel, the city-wall, or the holy images of the gods, from which . . . I separated myself, myself command-

ing that all thrust out the impious one . . .” (1378-83). Blindness is the exile that he had imposed on the murderer of Laius.

The question remains whether the concept of sacred kingship is an imposition on Greek culture. Did the Greeks have any experience or any concept of sacred kingship such that the interpretation of the Oedipus myth proposed here might fit into a broader cultural framework? To answer this question, one must distinguish between historical and mythological sacred kingship. There was a period of kingship in Greece, but the evidence for it is scanty,<sup>14</sup> and the evidence for sacred kingship in particular is almost non-existent. But Greek mythology is rich in kings, and they often have the attributes and roles of sacred kings.

In the Oedipus myth, it might be objected, incest is a crime and nothing else. But in the synopsis of Oedipus' career in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, Oedipus lived on as king after the discovery of his crimes. Incest did not unsuit him for kingship. In *Oedipus The King*, we witness the last day of a kingship that has been long and prosperous. The chorus says that Oedipus had brought new life to Thebes (1221), and in fact he had. He killed the Sphinx, which had been preying upon the young men of the Thebes and had threatened to render the city barren. That is why at the beginning of the tragedy, the Thebans beseech Oedipus to rid the city of the plague. This supernatural plague has brought not only disease, as an ordinary plague, but also a barrenness of the earth, the cattle, and the people (25-27, 171-4). The end of Oedipus' reign is marked then by infertility just as the beginning had been marked by new life. We have then, even in Sophocles, at least an implicit outline of sacred kingship, in which the very person of the king controls the well-being of his kingdom.

At the beginning of his reign, Oedipus married his mother, immediately after he killed the Sphinx. The two events are juxtaposed very closely in Sophocles and

also in all the other sources for the myth. Iocasta is even Oedipus' reward for his exploit. In other words, the advent of new life and the incestuous marriage are made to coincide as closely as possible, as if the juxtaposition of these two narrative motifs was a way of indicating the connection of the two ideas—incest and the renewal of life. In Sophocles' tragedy, furthermore, the very language in which Oedipus refers to his sexual relations with his mother indicates this connection. Again and again, he uses agricultural images. She is the field that he ploughs and from which his children grow.<sup>11</sup> This confusion of human and agricultural reproduction is fundamental to the notion of sacred kingship, in which, as many African examples attest, the king's own vitality is magically transferred to his whole country.

In the *Odyssey*, Homer speaks of "a blameless king, who . . . is lord over mighty men, upholding justice; and the black earth bears wheat and barley, and the trees are laden with fruit, the flocks bring forth young unceasingly, and the sea yields fish, all from his good leading; and the people prosper under him" (19.109 ff.). Martin Nilsson observes of this passage: "the old idea has been deflected and modernized by reference to the righteousness of the king as the cause of the abundant supply, but at bottom there is the old primitive conception of the power of the king to influence the course of nature and the luck of his people . . ."<sup>15</sup>

This ancient Greek identification of the king with his country is also shown in the scapegoat function of certain mythological kings. King Oinoklos was stoned to death by his people, following an oracle, at the time of a drought.<sup>16</sup> He was not as able as another king, Aeacus, who ended a drought by a prayer to Zeus.<sup>17</sup> Athamas, the subject of lost tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and others, was to be sacrificed by the Achaeans of Thessaly as a purification of the land, but was rescued at the last moment. These scapegoats, or near-scapegoats, show the same identification of the

king with his country that was implicit in the passage from the *Odyssey*.

As for incest, the incestuous marriages of the first gods, come immediately to mind, and, in particular, the marriage of Zeus, the king, with his sister, Hera. Since Zeus himself was an example of royal incest, it is not surprising to find incest and power connected in popular belief. Herodotus recounts a dream of the exiled Athenian tyrant, Hippias, who acted as adviser to the Persians at the time of the invasion that was defeated at Marathon: "Hippias, son of Pisistratus, had led the barbarians [the Persians] to Marathon, having the preceding night seen the following vision in his sleep. Hippias fancied that he lay with his own mother; he inferred, therefore, from the dream that, having returned to Athens and recovered the sovereignty, he should die an old man in his own country".<sup>18</sup> Again, it was believed concerning Periander, the Corinthian tyrant, that he had had intercourse with his own mother.<sup>19</sup>

The attribution of incest to tyrants probably has more to do with their criminality than with their sacredness, but the opinion concerning tyrants reveals the same notion that the ruler's power isolates him in extreme and otherwise forbidden forms of behavior. In the case of the king, the otherness conferred by such behavior makes him sacred; in the case of the tyrant, a criminal. Aristotle says that the man who cannot live in the polis is either a beast or a god.<sup>20</sup> This statement suggests the ambiguity, in the political context, of the crime of incest, which may either elevate or abase the perpetrator.

These, then, are some indications, which could be multiplied, of an ancient Greek concept of sacred kingship, but perhaps the myth of Zeus, which has already been mentioned, would alone suffice. Zeus, the most important god in the Greek pantheon, is the king of heaven, and his myth is the Greek cognate of a well-defined type of Near Eastern myth of kingship.<sup>21</sup> To abstract the story of Zeus from Hesiod's *Theogony*,



there is a prophecy concerning the son to be born, the son's removal and upbringing in a remote place, the fulfillment of the prophecy that he would depose his father, the slaying of a monster, and an incestuous marriage. The narrative pattern is obviously very similar to that of the Oedipus myth, and this similarity marks the Oedipus myth as one of sacred kingship. The narrative pattern of the Oedipus myth has sometimes been averaged, as it were, with several other myths or legends in order to create a "monomyth",<sup>22</sup> but if this narrative pattern is grasped in its specificity, as a cognate or at least a close analogue of the myth of Zeus, which is a cognate of the Near Eastern kingship myth, then the Oedipus myth is one of sacred kingship.

The experience to which the ancient Oedipus myth corresponded was far different, then, from the Oedipus Complex. Even if there never was actual sacred kingship in Greece, it is clear that in the fifth century the concerns expressed in the mythical figure of the sacred king were still alive—the sacredness of power, the ambiguity of the sacred, the interdependence of the political and the natural orders. To refer once again to Vernant's study, the historical institution of the scapegoat shows the sort of experience to which the myth of the sacred king corresponded.

In conclusion, it should be acknowledged that the interpretation of the Oedipus myth in terms of sacred kingship does not explain everything. The name Oedipus, "Swollen Foot", the exposure and mutilation, the close association of Oedipus and the Erinyes and several other matters point to a more primitive, or at least to a composite, figure. The name, for example, which means "Swollen Foot", was obviously an embarrassment, and the myth provided a rather far-fetched explanation, the piercing of the feet or ankles at the time of the exposure. The same sort of patently etiological narrative attached to Melampous, "Black Foot", Why "Black Foot"? His mother exposed him to

die with all of his body covered except his feet. His feet were burned by the sun and thus after his rescue he was called "Black Foot".<sup>23</sup> The name Oedipus, then, must have had some reference that made little sense in the narrative in which Oedipus found himself. Here is a clear indication that the myth contains heterogeneous elements, and further study of the myth in the context of Greek mythology may be able to isolate these and to suggest their relationship to sacred kingship.

*Boston College*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>But Freudians and Freudian revisionists did not overlook *Oedipus at Colonus*. See Lowell Edmunds and Richard Ingber, "Psychoanalytical Writings on the Oedipus Legend: A Bibliography," *American Imago* 34(1977)374-386.

<sup>2</sup>Of an unusual sort, but still a hero-cult. See G. Méautis, *L'Oedipe à Colone et le culte des héros*, Université de Neuchatel, Recueil de Travaux 19, 1940.

<sup>3</sup>For a survey of the pre-Sophoclean evidence for the Oedipus myth, see E.L. de Kock, "The Sophoclean Oidipus and Its Antecedents," *Acta Classica* 4(1961)7-28.

<sup>4</sup>I refer, of course, to C. Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 68(1955)428-444, and reprinted in Lévi-Strauss' *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1967: Anchor Books), and anthologized. Two critiques are: Terence S. Turner, "Oedipus: Time and Structure in Narrative Form," in *Forms of Symbolic Action*, Proceedings of the 1969 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society, ed. Robert F. Spencer, Seattle 1970, pp. 26-28; John Peradotto, "Oedipus and Erichthonius: Some Observations on Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Order," *Arethusa* 10(1977)85-101.

<sup>5</sup>On this distinction in African sacred kingship, see Luc de Heusch, "Aspects de la sacralité du pouvoir en Afrique," in *Le pouvoir et le sacré* (University of Brussels, 1962: Annales du Centre d'Étude des Religions 1) 151. For a general typology, see Claus Westermann, in the Macropaedia of *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 16, pp. 118-122.

<sup>6</sup>I have not mentioned the historical problem of the origin of Afri-

can sacred kingship, which has often been traced to Egyptian kingship. The historical problem will probably be put on a new basis by the discovery, reported in *The New York Times*, March 1, 1979, p. A1, that Nubian monarchy is several generations older than Egyptian.

<sup>7</sup>Evidence for the main points will be found in Tor Irstam, *The King of Ganda: Studies in the Institution of Sacral Kingship in Africa*, Lund, 1944.

<sup>8</sup>E.A. Alpers, "Dynasties of the Mutapa-Rozwi Complex," *Journal of African History* 11(1970)206-207: "Mwene, Mutapa II, Matope Nyanyehwe, is remembered in tradition as having secured the throne for himself over his numerous elder brothers by performing ritual intercourse with his sister". The only example of actual mother-son incest I have found is in E. Verhulpen, *Baluba et Balubaisés* (Anvers 1936, p. 183).

<sup>9</sup>I am following Masao Yamaguchi, "Kingship as a System of Myth: An Essay in Synthesis," *Diogenes* 77(1972)43-70.

<sup>10</sup>Thus de Heusch, *Essais sur le symbolisme de l'inceste royale en Afrique* (Brussels, 1958), p. 72. For a critique of de Heusch's concept of African sacred kingship, see Ronald Cohen, "Oedipus Rex and Regina: The Queen Mother in Africa," *Africa* 47 (1977)14-30. Cohen's main line of attack is to show that the features of kingship discussed as sacred by de Heusch have, in fact, practical functions. In defense of de Heusch, it can be observed that it would be surprising if African sacred kingship were completely symbolical and had no practical capacity at all. In other words, the sacred and the practical may and probably must co-exist, and to show that a custom is functional and expedient is not to have shown that it is not also felt as sacred.

<sup>11</sup>*Oedipus the King* 260, 460, cf. 122 and 1246, 1256-7, 1405, 1485, 1497. When Oedipus refers to his daughters' future state as unwedded and barren, he uses an adjective (*chersous* 1502) that is used elsewhere in Greek literature only of the earth.

<sup>12</sup>Michael W. Young, "The Divine King of the Jukun: A Re-evaluation of Some Theories," *Africa* 36(1966) 147.

<sup>13</sup>"Ambiguité et renversement. Sur la structure énigmatique d' 'Oedipe-Roi'," in J.-P. Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (Paris, 1972), pp. 99-131. Translated by Page duBois in *New Literary History* 9(1977-78) 475-501.

<sup>14</sup>There have been some suggestions of sacred kingship in the Bronze Age. See M.P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and Its Survival in Greek Religion*<sup>2</sup> (Lund, 1950), pp. 485-488; Jaan Puhvel, "Helladic Kingship and the Gods," in *Minoica: Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag von Johannes Sundwall* (Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, *Schriften der Sektion für*

*Altertumswissenschaft* 12, Berlin, 1958, ed. Ernst Grumach), pp. 327-333; Arne Furumark, "Was There A Sacral Kingship in Minoan Crete?" in *Studies in the History of Religions* 4 (*The Sacral Kingship*, Supplement to *Numen*, 1959)369-370; Peter Walcot, "The Divinity of the Mycenaean King," *Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici* 18, fasc. 2, pp. 53-62. But for the Dark Age intervening between the Mycenaean period and the archaic and classical periods, the evidence for a sacred kingship is very slight. For a survey, see Chester G. Starr, "The Decline of the Early Greek Kings," *Historia* 10(1961)129-138.

<sup>15</sup>*Homer and Mycenae* (London, 1933), p. 220.

<sup>16</sup>Plutarch, *Greek Questions* 294a, 297b-c.

<sup>17</sup>Apollodorus 3.12.6 with Frazier's note; Isocrates, *Evagoras* 9.14-15; Pausanias 2.29.7-8.

<sup>18</sup>The translation is by H. Carey, *Herodotus* (London, 1904), p. 287.

<sup>19</sup>Parthenius 17; Diogenes Laertius 1.96.

<sup>20</sup>*Politics* 1253a2-7; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145a15ff. These passages are discussed by Vernant, *op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup>See C. Scott Littleton, "The 'Kingship in Heaven' Theme," in *Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans: Studies of Indo-European Comparative Mythology*, ed. Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley, 1970), pp. 83-121.

<sup>22</sup>For the assimilation of the Oedipus myth to a "monomyth", see Otto Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero," in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings*, ed. Philip Freund (Vintage Books: New York, 1964), pp. 3-96; Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (London, 1936); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (New York, 1949).

<sup>23</sup>Scholia on Theocritus 3.43 and Apollonius of Rhodes 1.121.