

## FREUDIAN SYMBOLS IN J.P. BEKEDEREMO - CLARK'S SONG OF A GOAT

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### Abstract

*Sigmund Freud, regarded motivation as a producer of a kind of exerting energy—a self directing inner force which generates human activity. This is ascribed to the human psychic energy. He offered, in this psychic theory of motivation, erotic and libidinous explanations which apply to the thought motives and actions expressed by J.P. Bekederemo–Clark in **Song of a Goat** (a dramatic episode). The social appeal of this evokes a moral question of language acceptability. A quick literary appraisal unfolds a play with great psycho-analytic fascination. The morality of the utterances thus reveals an overdose of Freudian slips or symbols which help explain the poetic essence in which the play is couched. J.P. Bekederemo–Clark's **Song of a Goat** makes use of Freudian symbols that certainly explain one of the most rewarding ways of studying the play. One also needs to decode the message encapsulated in these symbols. Furthermore, because the issues dramatized in **Song of a Goat** dwell largely on the problem of procreation, most of the crucial symbols found in the play are erotic and Freudian in nature. This paper explores the proliferation and meaning of these Freudian symbols that are present in this highly fascinating play and concludes that Clark's use of Freudian symbols, evidently shows the expertise displayed by the literary giant, who, like Freud, is interested in the development of the human psyche which he expresses literarily.*

**Keywords:** Freudian symbol, Psychoanalysis, the unconscious mind, human behaviour

### Introduction

#### A Brief Biography of J. P. Bekederemo - Clark

John Pepper Bekederemo–Clark was born at Kiagbodo in Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State of Nigeria on 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1935. He had his Bachelor of Arts (B.A) degree in English in 1960 from the University College, Ibadan, Nigeria. He was a Parvin Fellow of Princeton University, U.S.A from 1962 to 1963 and a Research Fellow, Institute of African Studies, University of

Ibadan, Nigeria. His works include *Song of a Goat* (1961), *Three Plays* (1964), *America, their America* (1964), *A Reed in the Tide* (1965), *Ozidi* (1966).

### **Sigmund Freud: A Brief Biography and Achievement**

Sigmund Freud, an Austrian Neurologist and the founder of Psychoanalysis, was born on 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1856, in Czech Republic. He attended the University of Vienna between 1873 and 1881. Freud propounded the Clinical Method for treating Psychopathology through dialogue between a patient and a psychoanalyst. In 1923, Freud developed a more structural model of the mind comprising three entities id, ego and super-ego which he called the Psyche Apparatus. The three entities have most commonly been conceptualized as three essential parts of human personality.

### **Freudian Symbols in Relation to Clark's *Song of a Goat***

As the story in *Song of a Goat* is woven around the activities of human beings that constitute the characters in the play, Bekederemo-Clark makes use of Freud's theory which believes that events in a childhood have a great influence on the adult life, thus shaping the personality of the individual. In the theory, Freud espouses the importance of the unconscious mind, with the primary assumption of the theory that the unconscious mind governs human behaviour to a greater degree than people suspect. The theory emphasizes the fact that the main goal of Psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious mind, conscious. Freud goes further in the theory to distinguish between the manifest content of a dream i.e. what the dreamer remembers and the latent content, and the symbolic meaning of the dream, which is the underlying wish, often based on the event of the day.

In content and context, Clark's use of Freudian symbols in *Song of a Goat* is in consonance with the assumptions in the Freudian theory. Using one of the three Freudian Psyche Apparatus- ego-as a baseline, Clark in the play exploits a domestic problem of a family to show to readers how Zifa, the protagonist, allows his ego (the unconscious mind) to govern his behaviour, thereby exposing his weakness (sexual impotence) to people, who least expect him to be in such a physical and psychological dilemma. As Freud propounded the clinical method as a therapy for treating psychopathological problem, using dialogue between the patient and his doctor, so Clark presents Zifa's solution to his problem through dialogues between Zifa and other characters he considers are in position to proffer such solution, as presented in the story.

## The Story

Zifa's sexual impotence after the birth of his son is the crisis of *Song of a Goat*. Because Zifa will not let others find out the real reason why his wife has not had another child, he sends her to the Masseur. By so doing, it would look as if the fault lies with the woman, but the experienced Masseur quickly makes the right diagnosis and recommends that Ebriere should be turned to another man in Zifa's family; a prescription that the young proud Zifa strongly rejects. Ultimately frustrated, Ebriere eventually seduces Tonye, her husband's younger brother, into having an affair with her even though the required customary rituals have not been performed. It is this situation that generates the catastrophe which is dramatized in *Song of a Goat*.

## Freudian Symbols in 'Song of a Goat'

The symbols of this play fall into two major groups. The first clusters around Ebriere, the active female reproductive force, while the other pertains to the numerous manifestations of the curse that hangs over Zifa's homestead. We shall begin by exploring the meaning of the symbols of the Ebriere cluster.

The first significant symbol of this group is portrayed in Ebriere's initial dialogue with the Masseur.

**Masseur:** *An empty house, my daughter, is a thing of danger.  
If men will not live in it, bats or grass will,  
and that is enough signals for worse things to come in.*

**Ebriere:** *It is not my fault. I keep my house open at night  
and day, but my Lord will not come in.*

It is quite clear that in the passage above, 'house' functions as the Freudian symbol whose referent is the female reproductive organ. This view is reinforced by the occurrence of the same symbol in another dialogue between the Masseur and Ebriere:

**Ebriere:** *My house has its door open, I said.*

**Masseur:** *I can see that. Too open I rather fear.*

*Drought may set in any time now.*

*Let the man enter and bring in his warmth. (p. 3).*

Here again 'house' symbolizes the female reproductive organ, hence that art of entering it refers to the act of copulation.

The extent to which the Freudian slip that is present in the cluster may be seen is in yet another dialogue between Ebieri and her Masseur:

**Masseur:** *This is terrible, my daughter, nobody must hear of it.*

*To think that a stout staff is there at all  
for you to hold for support.*

**Ebieri:** *It isn't there, it isn't there at all for all its stoutness*

*and size. There isn't just a pith to the stout staff (p. 4).*

Here the staff is a symbol which signifies male's sexual organ. In the passage above, Ebieri tells the Masseur that there is not strength in the stout staff because her husband has become impotent.

Another Freudian symbol that is present in this cluster may be seen in the following passage. Here the Masseur is making his prescription after he has given the woman a thorough physical examination.

**Masseur:** *I see. Well, your gates are intact. As*

*Their keeper cannot even touch them*

*Someone has to go in or they will take rust (p.4).*

It is thus clear that the gates in this context stand for the entrance to Ebieri's house, and we have already made it known earlier that Ebieri's house symbolizes woman reproductive organ. Her husband cannot enter her gate because he is crippled between his legs. What the Masseur prescribes in the passage above is that someone else should take over Zifa's responsibility as husband and copulate with Ebieri in order to procreate. But the young and inexperienced Ebieri finds the suggestion totally repugnant and leaves in an appalling bad temper. The irony is that it is the same prescription that she embraces in the end, but her action then is dangerous because it is not preceded by the performance of the appropriate rites suggested by Masseur. It is

noteworthy that Zifa's response to Masseur's ideas are identical to his wife's initial reaction, as he says:

**Zifa:**            *I will not be the man  
                         To open myself for others to trample on (p. 3).*

By saying so, the proud, young man refuses to avail himself of the traditional solution to his problem. This is excessive pride (hubris), and it is this weakness in his character that makes nemesis inevitable. Thus, the play implies that the Masseur's prescription does not pose an insurmountable ethical problem, rather, it is Zifa's arrogance that precipitates his catastrophe.

The next Freudian symbol in this cluster is contained in the following segment of the Masseur's advice to Zifa:

**Masseur:**    *...The rains  
                         Are here one more and the forest getting  
                         Moist. Soon the earth will put on her green  
                         Skirt, the wind fanning her cheeks flushed  
                         From the new dawn. Will you let the woman  
                         Wait still when all the world is astir  
                         With seed and heady from flow of sap? (p. 7)*

Here "seed" is the symbol which stands for male's sperm, while "flow of sap" refers to the seminal fluid which transports the male sperm. Carried in this way, the sperm is thus able to fertilize the woman's egg and bring about the new birth and regeneration which the coming of the rains symbolizes.

Another Freudian symbol in this episode is the Masseur's retort to Zifa's statement:

**Masseur:**    *No, it is here I fear  
                         You do wrong by her, Ogun\* was consistent  
                         With his copulation of the land which  
                         Was his. Only in his case the land would not  
                         Yield of its own... (p. 8).*  
*(\*Ogun – god of iron that produces the instrument for  
                         cultivating land)*

Here the act of cultivating the land is analogous to the sexual act, because just as the cultivation of the land makes possible the bearing of fruits so also does copulation of man and woman bring about the birth of children to one's lineage. Zifa is not cultivating his allotted piece of land because he is cursed with sexual impotence. The Masseur, therefore, counsels him to desist from wishful thinking and face the reality that, in his situation, there can be no procreation without copulation. It is to this symbol of cultivation that the Masseur returns when he asks Zifa:

**Masseur:** *How do you know that?  
Have you ever considered another should  
Take over the tilling of the fertile  
Soil, and has wet mud flung back at you? (p. 11)*

In this context, the soil is the symbol which stands for the woman. Zifa, too, certainly understands the importance of the Masseur's counseling. His problem is that he is too arrogant to realize that what cannot be helped has to be endured.

The next Freudian symbol in this cluster is portrayed in Onikerere's dialogue with Zifa about two dogs at play.

**Onikerere:** *Why, boy these are no leopard and goat  
Interlocked between life and death, but  
Two dogs at play. Poor child, let me  
Close the door. (p. 28).*

In this context, the two dogs at play symbolize Tonye and Ebiere. Dogs are generally known for their lasciviousness. In the same way, the relationship between Tonye and Ebiere is a lascivious one. Since Zifa is crippled between his thighs, it would have been appropriate for him to perform the necessary rites and thereafter turn over his wife to his younger brother. That would have regularized the relationship between Tonye and Ebiere, and would have enabled them to procreate in Zifa's name, but Zifa refuses to perform such rituals. Consequently, the dog-play between Tonye and Ebiere which would ordinarily have added joy and progeny to the family now portends grave danger for all concerned. It is this danger that is depicted in the omen that is seen later by old Orukerere, as she tells Dode:

**Orukerere:** *...Oh, my son,*

*My son, I have seen a sight this dusk to make  
The eagle blind. I heard the cock crow  
As I woke up from sleep. That was sign  
Of good omen enough but little did I know  
It was the great betrayal of our race (p. 28)*

The omen that Orukerere refers to in the passage above is the crowing of the cock. Under normal circumstances, the crowing of the cock at dawn usually symbolizes the birth of a new day with the attendant hope that the new day will bring good fortune in its wake. But Orukerere's household is cursed; hence the crowing of the cock in this situation can only presage the onset of new disasters. Indeed the events that occur later in the day are the fulfillment of this unhappy augury, since it is on this day that Tonye and Ebierere defile Zifa's bed. This is the event which precipitates the eventual collapse of their entire household.

The next major cluster of symbols has something to do with a goat. The first symbol in this cluster is found in the Masseur's advice to Ebierere:

**Masseur:** *I understand  
Your feelings. Understand them very well. But  
You are young still as I say, and do not  
Know the ways of our land. Blood of goat  
So large cowries may pass thro' its nose,  
A big gourd of palm wine and three heads of  
Kola nut split before the dead of  
The land, and the dead are done. (p. 5)*

The blood of a goat may not be a phallic symbol in itself. However, its presence in a ritual whose goal is to transfer the sexual duties of a husband to another man imbues it with phallic significance. Hence, it undoubtedly signifies the woman's menstrual blood. Ordinarily, it is considered as ritually unclean. In the context, however, the blood of a goat – which is a purifying fluid in the ritual described above by the Masseur – washes away the contagion which is inherent in the association between a married woman and another man.

Another Freudian symbol of this cluster is portrayed at the beginning of the second movement of the play. Here, Orukerere, the drunken seer and Zifa's aunt,

heard the cry of a goat. Nobody else hears it, but the sound of the bleating of the he-goat fills the entire house. Unlike the blood of a goat which had earlier been shown to symbolize a purificatory object, the cry of a goat in the present context is a bad omen. It signifies the catastrophe which will overwhelm Orukerere and Zifa's entire household. It is indeed the crystallization of the curse on Zifa's lineage. At another level, however, this cry of a goat which is inaudible to all except Orukerere symbolizes, not merely the curse on Zifa's household but Zifa's personal agony which he cannot communicate to any other person. Thus the bleating of anguish, as may be seen from the following statement:

**Orukerere:** *Of course,*

*You do not hear him bleating, the goat*

*How could you? The ram does not cry out*

*For help although led into captivity (p. 15)*

Thus, Zifa who is portrayed as a mute, tragic figure symbolizes masculine strength and the endurance of a ram which enables it to refrain from crying even as it is being led to the slaughter - house. Since Zifa's curse is very central to the development of the plot of the play, one is justified in exploiting the circumstances that brought such a devastating misfortune on him. Judging from the dialogue between Zifa and Masseur, it appears that Zifa is grovel a little longer. Thus, for performing this final duty, albeit a little too soon, Zifa is cursed with sexual impotence:

**Masseur:** *Of course, not. You did what every*

*Dutiful son would do when you brought*

*Him back home among his people.*

*It may have been a little bit early*

*for one who died of the white taint.*

**Zifa:** *And for that they have picked my flesh*

*To the bones like fish a floating corpse,  
others grumble it was in time of flood.*

*They will all be too ready now to smirk*

*If they hear I am become drained of*

*My manhood (p. 10)*

The next symbol in this cluster is another omen, as may be seen in the following dialogue between Ebiere and her son, Dode:

**Ebiere:** *All right, all right, Dode, I quite follow  
Your mother's been drunk again and  
Seeing visions of houses burning.*

**Dode:** *No, it was a goat this time. It was crying  
Because a leopard had it in its claws (p.19)*

The impalement of a goat within the claws of a leopard is an elaboration of the symbol of the curse of Zifa's household. In the earlier version of omen, it was merely the bleating of a he-goat, but there was no explanation of what was hurting the animal. In this second version, however, we realize that the goat is crying because it is about to be devoured by a leopard. The next time when the omen is portrayed, it assumes another form, this time, it takes the form of a snake.

**Orukerere:** *So I slept? And you didn't find  
Him? I know it was no proper leopard  
There, I see its sports the long slide  
Of the earth one. You know it is the dumbest  
Of all beasts whether in town or bush, yes.  
Even as the beast strikes you dead on the sand.*

**Zifa:** *So from leopard it is become a snake? (p. 21)*

What is portrayed here is not an ordinary snake. It is indeed the viper whose apparent docility often ensnares its unsuspecting victims. Only the deadline of the viper's venom reveals the true nature of the detestable creature, and since the viper is the new symbol of Zifa's curse, we can deduce that the new symbol portends tremendous danger for the affected household. This omen appears to the seer yet another time, and this time, it has transformed itself into the form of a menacing serpent:

**Orukerere:** *... I said there was  
A serpent in the house but nobody as usual*

*Will take me seriously. Yet the hiss of the creature*

*Was up among the eaves, down under the*

*Stool. (pp. 28-29).*

This time, the snake has cast off the apparent docility of a viper and has assumed the ferocity of a hissing serpent. This symbolizes the imminence and ferocity of the impending disaster which hangs over Zifa's family.

In the final movement of **Song of a Goat**, there is an interplay of symbols from the two clusters already discussed above. The beginning of this final movement portrays Zifa complaining that his wife has denied him access to his own bed so that his younger brother Tonye may continue to defile it. Thus, this portrait of Ebiere, as she prevents Zifa from gaining access to his legitimate bed, symbolizes the ritually abominable act which Tonye and the woman have committed on that bed earlier in the day:

**Zifa:** *I cannot believe it. I just cannot;  
Eyes may as yet see and ears may as yet hear  
My own brother who I have looked after  
As a son if it is true. I'll cut off his  
Neck with my cutlass. (p.30)*

The next symbol that one encounters in this final movement of the play is that of a he-goat. As earlier noted, the he-goat normally symbolizes lasciviousness, however in this context, the animal additionally stands for a sacrificial animal, whose blood is supposed to cleanse Zifa's household

**Orukerere:** *Now Tonye, do not cross your elder  
Brother. Go in and look for the he-goat  
The one that is for sacrifice (p. 33)*

This is reminiscent of an earlier incident of the symbol of a goat, which represents a sacrificial atonement. In the earlier manifestation, it was supposed to be the animal whose slaughter could normalize Tonye's affairs with his brother's wife. The Masseur's recommendation on that occasion was however not implemented; hence, Tonye's copulation with Ebiere introduced yet another element of pollution into their already cursed household, but unlike the earlier manifestation of the symbol where it theoretically could have performed a

cleaning role in the tainted Zifa's home. First Zifa - the chief supplicant - is not in the right frame of mind for offering a sacrifice that is acceptable to the gods. Secondly, he has refused to have ablutions before he holds the sacrificial animal. Thus, he transfers a contagion of pollution to the atonement itself.

The next symbol in this interchange between the clusters is that of a beast of prey:

**Orukerere:** *I shall be waiting for you my poor*

*Poor child, he has blundered upon the  
beast that is preying on him (p. 34)*

It should be emphasized that a beast of prey need not be a phallic symbol on its own. In this context, however, it becomes a phallic symbol\ as it stands for Tonye who is preying sexually on his elder brother since he has usurped Zifa's sexual rights over Zifa's own wife.

The event which incorporates by far most significant phallic symbol in the final movement of *Song of a Goat* is the eventual offering of a he-goat to the gods. Zifa severs the goat's head with one master stroke of his knife. The irony is that the erect spurting of the blood of the goat stands in mocking contrast to Zifa's own withered phallus. Therefore Zifa orders his younger brother to force the head of the goat, horns and all into the pot, needless to mention that the act of forcing the goat's head into the pot symbolizes sexual intercourse. In this symbolic imitation, the head of the he-goat represents the male phallus which is personified by Tonye, while the pot stands for the female sexual organ that is personified by Ebiere. Forcing the head of the goat into the pot breaks the pot itself, whereupon Ebiere faints. The breaking of the pot and Ebiere's fainting are related incidents, since Ebiere is the human counterpart of the pot. What is portrayed in the episode is, therefore, a manifestation of homeopathic magic wherein the destruction of an inanimate object is expected to result in the ill-health of its human analogue. An even more important aspect of this episode is the conclusion that Zifa draws from it because prior to this event he has continued to hope that somehow Tonye had no sexual intercourse with Ebiere. The incident, however, convinces Zifa of the guilt of the two suspects. Consequently, he makes up his mind thereafter to kill Tonye, his younger brother:

**Zifa:** *No, do not cross me. It is none of your*

*Fault but I'll get at him. I say do not cross me*

*Don't you see they admit their guilt? One falls*

*Fainting and the other flees. Now, he's fled  
In and barred the door. I shall not let him  
Escape me. I will break open the door, break  
It and get at this monster. Now will you come  
Out, thief, noon-day thief (p. 35)*

The next symbol in this interplay is that of 'cloth'

**Zifa:** *So that is your answer, thief? Well, open  
And I'll tell you the sun although it dries the  
Cloth, never assumes it. But you have, you have  
And left me naked before our enemies (p. 38)*

Here, 'cloth' symbolizes Ebiere, Zifa's wife. Like 'cloth', she hitherto covers Zifa's nakedness by allowing neighbours to have the illusion that their inability to bear more children had something to do with their own inadequacy. By so doing, Ebiere has shielded her husband from the taunt of their unkind townspeople. Again, when the Masseur suggests that Zifa should voluntarily hand over his wife to another member of his family, Zifa rejects the advice because such an arrangement would expose his sexual impotence. He laments that Tonye has taken away the 'cloth' which has previously covered his nakedness. Hence, he accuses Tonye of exposing him to the ridicule of his enemies.

Another symbol in this interplay is that of 'rags'

**First Neighbour:**

*And what is to happen to this poor  
Woman. Now a bundle of rags on the ground?*

**Orukerere:** *Let me be, oh, do not try to lift me  
Up but let me lie in the ruins they have  
Wrought between them. (p. 41)*

In the passage cited above, the 'rags' symbolize Orukerere. Earlier in the day she used to play the role of a drunken prophetess and seer. Now, however, her role has been degraded to that of a rag that is not even good enough to be used in mopping up the mess that Zifa and Tonye have made of their homestead. On the contrary, she is an utterly useless rag; hence, she craves to be left in the ruins of the cursed house. As a result, she is now the epitome of fatalistic despair.

Admittedly, she does prophesy again, but she merely foresees the total desolation of her clan:

**Orukerere:** *There will never be light again in this  
House, child, this is the night of our race  
The fall of all that ever reared up head  
Or crest. (p. 42)*

The old lady's premonition is confirmed, for not long after this prophecy, Ebiere has a miscarriage. Thus, the would-be offspring of the ritually unclean relationship between Tonye and Ebiere – the relationship which precipitated the suicide of both Tonye and Zifa-is hereby aborted. Thereafter, it remains for the 'night-rain pouring down at sea' to create the atmosphere for the announcement of Zifa's passage to the other world:

**Third Neighbour:**

*Well, you say now he went out of here  
As one in sleep. He said nothing more  
And so, silent we followed on his heels  
It was a heavy walk, the fishing  
Baskets scattered all about, the new  
Canoes carving on the shore. And the  
Grace was wet on our feet. Presently,  
Fording the sands, we saw him reach the  
Water's edge. Just then that noise you  
Said you heard as distant thunder rolled  
Out to where we stood. It was steamer  
Calling out for a plot to pass beyond  
The bar. At the sound of it, Zifa seemed  
To start out his sleep: Blow,  
Siren, blow he bellowed as in reply,  
And blow till your hooting drown the  
Morning of the sea. No blow will be  
Stronger. The owl, he said, that should*

*Hoot at night has this afternoon blown  
Down his house as they have the ancestral  
Hall open in the market place. And the  
Stalls there that should be crowned with  
Voices are filled now even with the  
Buzz of houseflies. All are fled,  
Fled, and left behind bats to show their  
Beards by day (pp. 43-44)*

The next symbol is again the bleating of a goat. As has been pointed out earlier, this portion symbolizes the curse which is placed on Zifa's household. Here, Orukerere initially mistakes this somber song of the goat for the stalking of a leopard, but she eventually recognizes the signal for what it is:

**Orukerere:**        *Go on, who am I to question you? I heard  
The goat crying all the while and though  
Its a leopard stalking (p. 44)*

The last significant phallic symbols of the play are those of fruit and seed.

**Orukerere:**        *...But good people bear with me, you will  
Bear with me, won't you? You see black birds  
Whose immortal knot both my sons have tied and  
Slung have gathered the loot, all the loot,  
And left behind not one seed of my fruit (p. 45)*

Here the black birds are obviously the harbingers of death. Orukerere says that they have gathered the loot because she feels that these harbingers of death have robbed her of most precious treasure: the seed of her fruit, in this context, seed symbolizes progeny, while fruit stands for lineage. Thus, in the passage quoted above, the old seer is lamenting the complete annihilation of the adult males of her lineage.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, J.P. Bekederemo-Clark's *Song of a Goat* is a dramatization of the repercussions of a curse on a family. The story itself is narrated through a sustained use of Freudian symbols, principal of which is the song of a goat itself. The dramatist is thus justified in choosing this central symbol to be the title of the

play, since the symbol of the *Song of a Goat* is the paradigm of the dramatic enterprise.

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