

The Ajase Complex and Various Types of Guilt

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Legends and myths contain universally shared fantasies expressing anxieties linked to basic human UCS conflicts.

This is a psychoanalytic study of the literature concerning an old Japanese Buddhist story about Ajase. This legend elaborates on the ambivalence conflicts concerning parents' towards the conception and birth of their first child, as well as their son's emotional responses and struggles regarding his parents, focusing particularly on his relationship with the mother.

I shall summarize the Ajase story and discuss its many meanings placing it within the world-wide context of psychoanalysis.

Nagai (1984) gives credit to Kosawa's (1932 paper, published in German, "Two Kinds of Guilt Feelings (Ajase Complex)," for taking this story from an old Buddhist scripture: Bimbisara was the childless King of

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Magadha. The king wished to have a child and decided to visit a fortune teller to inquire whether he eventually would ever have a child. He was promised a child within three more years, after a hermit's death. He was told that the hermit would be reborn as the king's son. However, the King could not wait that long! So he asked the hermit to come over to his palace. But he refused the King's wish. The King was then furious and killed him. When the hermit was dying, he reiterated that he would be reborn as the King's child and added "Some day, the son will kill the King." On that very moment Queen Vaidehi became pregnant and the King was very pleased. When another fortune teller was called, he again predicted the Queen will deliver a son who will kill the King. Bewildered with the mixture of joy for having a son and worries over his own future, the King talked about his concerns with Queen Vaidehi. They planned together the Queen's delivery from the top of a tower, so that the child would die falling to the ground. The child was delivered from the top of a tower and fell down. But he survived, having only broken his small finger, the fifth one. The boy was afterwards nicknamed "Prince Broken Finger."

About that time there was a man, Devadatta, who was a cousin of Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism. This Devadatta was violently jealous of Shakyamuni's faith and fortune, so he decided to kill Shakfa to take over his wealth and to become himself the

Buddha. He challenged Ajase to do likewise with the old King: “I shall become the new Buddha and you will become the new King.” Ajase protested, claiming to be very grateful to his father. However, Devadatta argued: “You are not indebted to your father since he had your mother delivering you from the top of a tower in order to kill you; look at your broken finger!” (“Onisho-en” means in Japanese both “broken finger” and “pre-birth resentment”).

Ajase confirmed with a governmental minister the story of his birth and then decided to follow Devadatta’s suggestion by confining the King without any food, expecting that he would die of starvation and Ajase would then become King. But after seven days of confinement, father was still well and active. Ajase learned then, that the Queen Vaidehi had secretly been feeding the King everyday. Ajase became furious and almost killed his mother with his sword. A governmental minister stopped him saying: “A King’s son killed his father to become a King but I have never heard of a King killing his own mother!” So Ajase ordered instead some subordinates to confine his mother. Ajase became King after killing his father and was then ready to fully fulfill his pleasures. But he regretted having killed father and developed a severe, foul-smelling skin rash. No one could approach him because of the pestilence. His mother and his subordinates took care of him but the rash became worse. One minister suggested that Ajase should go with him to visit Shakya, the Buddha. Ajase then heard a voice from the sky saying: “Follow his advice and go to Shakya to get your salvation. I feel sorry for you!” The voice added: “I am your father.” Ajase then felt more distressed and passed out.

Ajase thought that not even Shakya would forgive him for having killed his father. But Shakya argued: “If you the King are guilty and deserve punishment, then all the respected ‘minor’ Buddhas of the world would also have to be punished, since your father became a King only because of his generous contributions to Buddhas. Your father would not have ever become King without our acceptance of his generous gifts; if we had not received them, you would not have had to kill him since he would not have been the King. Hence, if you are guilty for killing your father, then all of us, all the Buddhas, are also guilty. If Buddhas, who are suspected, are not being punished, there is then no reason for you alone to be punished.” Ajase felt better after hearing Shakya’s words and said: “No fine trees grow in nature from bad trees, but in my case I find a fine tree growing from a bad tree.” Ajase then became a faithful believer. After that Devadatta failed in his attempt to kill Shakya and fell into Hell.

JAPANESE PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDIES BASED ON THE AJASE STORY

Kosawa (1932) wrote about the “Two Kinds of Guilt/The Ajase Complex” comparing the oedipal feelings based on the son’s punishment for killing his father with the guilt Ajase experienced after being forgiven for the attempted murder of his mother. Freud’s Oedipal Complex focuses on the conflict of love, while Kosawa’s Ajase Complex deals with a more fundamental, deeper conflict: The son’s anger at the egoism of the Queen as a woman.

Okonogi (1978) characterized the oedipal conflict as a “paternal” complex, while Ajase’s is a “maternal” one. He adds that, “Oedipal conflicts focus on the child’s impulses,” while “the starting point of the Ajase Complex are the passions of the mother” which are resented by the child. Okonogi elaborated on Ajase’s pre-birth “rancor” or resentment (1978) : “Ajase’s murderous intent against mother arises from his anger at having been betrayed by her.” Pre-birth rancor is “used as a tool of Amai, a means of making unreasonable demands on the parents” (Okonogi, 1978, p. 105). There is an interflow of “reciprocity and masochism between mother and child.” “Ajase goes from resentment of his mother, to a sense of guilt, to the experience of being forgiven by his mother and then to repentance.” Both mother and son “are flexible, correlative and mutually responsive” (Okonogi, 1979, p. 104). “Reciprocity is the other side of the coin of communication (Japanese style) based on tacit understanding. Seeing through other’s eyes is like being “attuned to one another” with a sense of unity with others...; 2) The effort to be unselfish; 3) the magnanimity to accept selfishness of others...and forgive them; 4) the expectation that others will feel a sense of guilt toward one; and 5) the hope that others will show gratitude and respect for one’s unselfish efforts. These factors can be regarded as manifestations of the Ajase Complex,” he concluded.

Okonogi explored the world of pardon beyond resentment, whereby masochistic forgiveness is a way of “controlling (the others) by appealing to their emotions” (Okonogi, 1979, p. 109), particularly to their sense of guilt. His starting point is another modification of the original legend, whereby Ajase was rescued by his mother’s devoted care. He thus underlines the mother-child relationship, especially the Ajase Complex

promoting and identification with the idealized mother as the provider of Amae and pardon.

PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDIES OF JAPANESE FOLK TRAGEDIES

Kitayama (1985) investigated some Japanese myths and folk tales realizing that they “reveal unsolved conflicts in a two-body relationship within the ‘pre-oedipal relationship with the mother, rather than the typical triangular situation of the Oedipal Complex.’” Kitayama first reviewed the legend of Urashima, the fisher lad, which is characterized by a “supernatural experience with time” and “describes the tragedy of object loss,” after breaking a promise to respect a prohibition not to open a specific box. Kitayama also examined tales of marriage between humans and nonhumans. “The main plot of these tales can be summarized by saying that an animal (a turtle, a snake, a crane), disguised as a beautiful woman, marries a man but runs away after its secret is discovered. The animal/wife insists on the husband obeying the prohibition of don’t look, in order to hide her natural form. The husband, however, “breaks the prohibition, causing the wife to disclose her original self, which in turn causes their separation” (Kitayama, 1985, p. 177). “The secret facts which...the hero is forbidden to see, center around the biological revelation of motherhood, i.e., giving birth, suckling... These heroines are derived from the infantile wish-fulfillment towards the mother. (They perform) maternal...functions which produce babies, milk, clothes, meals, and so on. The hero idealizes the products..., but he cannot accept the truth of how they are made” (my own italics) (Kitayama, 1985, pp. 178-179). The hero, being confronted with “the unveiled facts of

motherhood...sees the whole picture of the mother as an animal..." This process of "animalization reveals his insufficient capacity to perceive and to accept the mother-like figure as a whole human being." His breaking of the prohibition of "don't look confronts him with what he had been attacking or what he should feel guilty of, something he cannot accept" (Kitayama, 1985 p. 180).

"Heroes have met their beautiful princesses or wives in return for their rescuing tormented and injured animals... The animals' injuries and anger were caused by aggressive parts of the heroes (themselves), with whom the readers would identify themselves...and the injured animal was the injured mother" (Kitayama, 1985, p 183).

"For the development of the story, the prohibition of "do not look" is an important element...expected to operate as a defensive signal against... catastrophic consequences in the two-body relationship. The hero eventually cannot help breaking such prohibition, to be then confronted with incestuous facts and the dark side of motherhood" (Kitayama, 1985, p 184).

DISCUSSION

The Ajase Complex includes expressions of:

- A) Some universal emotional conflicts to be psychoanalytically studied, and
- B) Some alleged "typical" Japanese personality traits and cultural values.

I shall describe both aspects, trying to avoid the risk of taking one aspect of the Ajase Complex for its global constellation; that is to say, trying to avoid the mistake of taking “pars pro toto.” I shall focus instead on the complete picture, avoiding an “either/or” approach, adopting instead a more integrative attitude of “both/and.”

Early Psychoanalytic literature underemphasized some conflicts highlighted in the Ajase Complex such as:

Parents’ filicidal wishes, shared by mother and father, in their ambivalence toward their child, sometimes expressed as fantasies of murdering the baby. Japan’s legal freedom to practice abortion perhaps may be connected with the mental ease to talk about filicide.

The child’s rancor (Okonogi, 1978) or resentment against parents, particularly vis-à-vis mother for not loving the product of her mating, above her own self or her partner. Hence, the child’s subsequent murderous rage against mother (Okonogi, 1978, p. 92).

The need to be forgiven for their acknowledged murderous wishes against each other, becomes a vigorous link between mother and child: Reciprocal forgiveness generates a special kind of guilt and initiates a Reciprocal forgiveness generates a special kind of guilt and initiates a nonverbal sadomasochistic dialogue between them across their lives.

The importance of aggression and guilt in the infant's early relationships with mother and in the child's emotional development were described by Melanie Klein (1932) in her psychoanalytic study of children, without any specific reference to mother's filicidal wishes, but describing instead the infant's fears and concerns over damaging mother's body while angrily interacting with her. Fantasies of reciprocal sadomasochistic control between child and mother were clearly implicit in Klein's descriptions of projective identification, as a peculiar "interpersonal" defense mechanism. Bion's (1962) studies on projective identification made even more explicit the infant/mother nonverbal dialogue.

THE AJASE COMPLEX AND THE CONFLICTS WITH MOTHER

Her ambivalence towards the unborn infant is highlighted by either describing her as self-centeredly using her child to bring back her husband's interest in her (Kosawa, 1950), thus referring to the conflict of roles between being a woman and being a mother, or describing her, twice as preferring her husband over her son (first planning to kill the baby at delivery, later secretly protecting her husband death by starvation). She thus conspired twice with her spouse against their son.

The subject of filicidal wishes was ignored in psychoanalytic literature for a long time. A. Rascovsky (1971) has worked extensively on this subject and formed an international association devoted to its study.

The “negative” or “bad” connotations first mentioned about mother’s role are counteracted by her being essentially a “giver”: of life, nurturance, care, and pardon; she sometimes gives while masochistically postponing herself. Mother as a provider has a tremendous power which may lead to her idealization, or to her degradation. She is either the generous giver, perceived as an ideally good part-object that provides forever for the child’s well being, or is on the contrary downgraded and feared as a damaged animal (Kitayama, 1985) dirty, brutal, ferocious, and threatening. However, the ambivalence towards these symbolic mother-animals in the Japanese stories is still there, insofar as frequently cranes and snakes are also perceived as clean, beautiful and mystical animals. Mother products may be treasured when given by her, but her true nature and the way she elaborated her products (mainly by mating) are totally unacceptable!

Mother’s power is exercised through giving and forgiving. Hence, her expectations of indebtedness and gratitude to be followed by repaying her gifts, particularly her ability to pardon: If mother forgives her child’s matricidal wishes, she expects in return to be herself forgiven for her self-centered demands to be loved, for her filicidal wishes and for her betrayal, when preferring father over son. By pardoning her son’s guilt, she gets pardoned for her own filicidal plans and gains control over her son, speculating with his indebtedness with her. Her meek, masochistic, self-apologizing pardoning gentleness is displayed as maternal self-postponement, depicting her as the ideal kind mother, who would forever understand and forgive her children. Her offspring in their turn can identify themselves with mother’s

masochistic pardoning and the sadomasochistic nonverbal dialogue can go on and on, struggling over: Who upstages whom? Who is in control, the mother of the offspring? Some critics of Christianity comment that when Christ recommended his disciples to offer the other cheek after being slapped in their faces, he was betting on the power of masochism by combining gentleness with pardon, thus attempting to control the world by inducing guilt in the others and also a sense of indebtedness. Mothers seem to be cast in a similar role in all these Japanese legends. Okonogi (1979, p. 104) wrote on “reciprocity and masochism,” describing these factors are “manifestations of the Ajase Complex.”

Buruma (1984) examined the popular media films, T.V., plays, books, comics, and other cultural institutions that shape and reflect the Japanese collective imagination and collected them in his book Behind The Mask. Buruma elaborated a discussion about Tora-san, as a Japanese cult figure from the movies. Tora-san seems to personify the Japanese masochistic style: Gentle, meek, kindly able to understand others' unspoken feelings, unselfishly keeping his own deep emotions unspoken. His home evokes the Japanese childhood home, the “Furusato,” or “Old Village” basking in Yasashiisa, or nostalgia for his mother, Buruma writes (p.214): “Being cut off from home, from mother in particular, is the only road to freedom, but it is also the cruellest fate imaginable. Wandering heroes (who) are also often failures like Tora-san, make audiences feel sorry for them. The tragic life of the outsider, the outcast, confirms how lucky we are to lead such restricted, respectable lives” (p. 218).

THE AJASE COMPLEX AND DEFENSES AGAINST GUILT

Kosawa related the Ajase Complex with two kinds of guilt: Oedipus dealing with father's castration threats as punishment for lusting after mother and Ajase being pardoned by mother after his acting matricidal and later on experiencing repentance.

The Ajase Complex includes also other kinds of guilt: For filicidal wishes, for self-centeredness, wishing to take over Buddha's power, for patricidal plans. We may say the Ajase Complex contains the many faces of guilt. Hence, it also describes several possible defenses against multifaced guilt.

Several Defenses

Sharing guilt with somebody else can exonerate one's own responsibility, like Ajase plotted patricide with Devadatta or as parents jointly decided and planned to kill Ajase during delivery. Shaka claims that since he himself made Ajase's father, a king, he Shaka himself started the series of events that led Ajase to kill his father, the King. Hence, no one is guilty but two are or even everyone is guilty.

Denial of real or fantasied wrongdoing and of hostility against loved persons:

Through rationalizing rancor or resentment one could feel that "murder is justified" instead of wrong, since it would be simply a reaction to previous victimization and/or betrayal. Attempting to make excuses, the Ajase Complex seems to forgive the son and blame mostly his mother, in contrast with Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Complex

which blames the son for having forbidden sexual or murderous wishes, while mother is excused and it is only father who orders the filicide.

Confusion seems to result, making us wonder: Who is to be blamed or even, what did actually happen? Perhaps, since everyone is guilty no one really is? The perception of reality became then comparable to seeing many identical visual images in a hall of mirrors, particularly when Shaka pardoned Ajase; the same view was then replicated an infinite number of times and it became impossible to distinguish between the real and the reflected visual images. Hence, confusion prevailed.

Splitting: When and if confusion becomes unbearable splitting can be used as a primitive, incipient attempt to distinguish and to differentiate between “good” and “bad,” between “powerful” and “weak.” The objects, for instance, can be separated into categories: The idealized ones seen as models to be imitated or identified with, while the threatening ones are responded back with defensive hostility. Those in power were divided in the Ajase story between those who exercised the civil authority and those who had religious power. Shaka had a grip on the world through his religious power to forgive.

The self can also be split into “good” and “bad” representations. Sometimes the “bad” self images are attributed to an imaginary twin (as Bion (1967) wrote about). In the Ajase story, two young men (Ajase and Devadatta) were like twin images planning to kill, respectively, the King and the religious authority. They openly

discussed their assassination plans and supported each other. At the end, while Shakya pardons Ajase, Devadatta falls into Hell after having plotted and failed to kill Shakya in order to take over his religious power as the new Buddha. Like the Judeo-Christian “Fallen Angel” Lucifer, Devadatta went to Hell after wishing to become God. All the Buddhas were exempted from guilt vis-a-vis supporting the man who became King and later on abused Ajase, but Devadatta condemned himself to hell. The story in some way scapegoats him the only one who goes to Hell. An elementary distinction or differentiation between “good” and “evil” may have seemed necessary to overcome the previous confusion.

When Melanie Klein summarized by Segal (1974) focused her psychoanalytical work to describe her original clinical observations on early mother/infant relationships, she seemed to diminish or almost to ignore the emotional importance of father in the children’s minds. Similar oversimplification seems to infiltrate the summarized descriptions of the Ajase Complex such as: The Ajase Complex deals with maternal conflicts, while the Oedipus focused on paternal issues, or the Ajase Complex speaks of pre-genital phenomena but the Oedipus is centered on genital problems. Those attempts to summarize, to compare, and to classify tend to forget that human emotional development and object relationships include indeed “all of the above.” Hence, our psychoanalytic understanding should integrate both Ajase and Oedipus Complex types of guilt, genital and pre-genital conflicts, maternal and father-related issues. We should avoid an “either/or” dichotomy and try to use instead an integrative “both/and” approach.

Kitayama (1985) studied several Japanese folk tragedies where the commandment do not look paramount. If such prohibition is violated, the punishment is the loss of a gratifying female partner. Kitayama conceived the prohibition to look as a mental defense against seeing the truth about mother's mature genital functions, from her sexual arousal to orgasmic climax and delivery. The Japanese folklore depicts women's real or true nature as "animal-like," suggesting a split between the images of nurturant, caring mother and those other views of mother where she is "degraded to the status of a 'mere woman' or animal," (Okonogi, 1978, p. 104). Kitayama comments that (p. 183): "These stories describe the tragic ways in which an infant passes through the universal phase of the inhibitory relationship with the mother."

The commandment "do not look" can be understood psychoanalytically as an attempt to restrain children's curiosity and to alleviate parents' anxieties about their sexual intimacy, being possibly witnessed by their offspring in the traditional prevailing one bedroom Japanese family house. "The combination of physical intimacy, during childhood, and the social repression that follows; the idealization of the mother and the social repression that follows; the idealization of the mother and the trauma at the first discovery of her female sexuality, all these occurs anywhere; but nowhere, is the shock quite so devastating to so many people as in Japan" writes Buruma (1984, p. 63). Okonogi (1978, p. 103) dealt with this issue by almost denying children's exclusion from their parents' intimacy, when he wrote: "Parents and children traditionally comprise a unit and often share the same bedroom. As far as possible,

the parents conceal the fact that they are also man and woman. Japanese grow up in a world where parents and children are united as a single unit in which the children are fully integrated.” He concludes from the above that “Japanese acquire a psychological structure different from the Oedipus Complex.”

We need to keep in mind, however, that these are universal mental phenomena: The children’s curiosity about their parents’ sexual intimacy, their need to deny their exclusion from such parental private experiences, even by pretending that it does not exist. Perhaps the Japanese one bedroom houses and the characteristic close physical intimacy between mother and child increase the need to deny both curiosity about and exclusion from parental sexual intimacy, but beware not to eliminate the children’s genital curiosity and interest in the parent of the opposite sex observable again and again in psychoanalytic practice. It would be like becoming accomplices with the patients’ resistances or defenses to go along with their denial of erotical oedipal wishes to claim that oedipal wishes do not exist in the Japanese unconscious.

Since I am barely a beginner and a slow student of Japanology, I disqualify myself to further discuss the subject. There is no doubt that Japanese are different from Westerners in many regards; their values are rooted in Shinto, Buddha, and Confucius, while Occidental ones are Judeo, Greco, Roman, Christian. Japanese family and group ties and relationships also culturally differ significantly from those of the West. Therefore, specific Japanese values and styles need to be considered and understood when a psychoanalyst treats a patient with such a background.

However, Japanese uniqueness is relative, in so far as it does not require a special, different method to explore the unconscious and Japanese can do free associations like anyone else, with the same considerable difficulties. Gertrude Ticho (1970) and Tetsuya Iwasaki (1970) agreed that the criteria for analyzability and the advantages of the analyst's technical neutrality are applicable to Japanese persons, as they are with members of any other culture. A Japanese undergoing psychoanalysis will educate the analyst, regarding the unique, specific circumstances in her/his life as any analysand does. And the analyst will try to learn about those specific different life circumstances, in order to work as best as possible, applying the expertise on how the mind operates as any analyst does with every patient.

Finally, I shall return to Japanese masochism in social interactions: When Shakyapa pardoned Ajase, he stated: "Everyone is guilty," therefore each one should masochistically blame him or herself and identify with the others, sharing guilt and self reproaches: Thus common, shared guilt leads to mutual forgiveness. But it can lead also to confusion through denial of individual differences, until the paradoxical reality that everybody "looks alike but is simultaneously different from everybody else" destroys the illusion of being identical. I am reminded here of the visual experience while visiting Kyoto, when I saw in Sanjusangendo, the 1001 Images of Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy, the 1001 Images looking all exactly alike, until one begins to observe more carefully the subtle differences between each one of them. The illusory belief that everyone is identical can be understood as an unconscious,

social defense against fears that differences between each one of them. The illusory belief that everyone is identical can be understood as an unconscious, social defense against fears that differences may bring out envy or murderous rivalry. “Most Japanese are mortally afraid of seeming in any way different from their neighbor. ‘Ordinary’ (Heibon) is cited by Japanese as the most desirable thing to be” (Buruma, 1984, p. 124). We know that “Japanese groups” are more like extended families. In fact, one only exists in the context of one’s own group and “too much individualistic behavior can result in serious ostracism and, even worse, expulsion from the group” (Mura Hachibu) (Buruma, 1984, p. 185). Vicious, hurtful, scapegoating can be the punishment for a Japanese group member accused of individualism, of being different. Translated into the terms of the Ajase story: The social Japanese choice is between extreme punishment (Mura Hachibu), or group scapegoating, going to Hell as Devadatta, or just the opposite: Sharing every Buddha’s guilt and self reproaches to reach pardon and forgiveness. Within these contexts, Kosawa’s courage in proclaiming his conceptual differences from Freud’s collegial psychoanalytic group seems paradoxically non-Japanese. But Kosawa expressed his concepts describing “another type of guilt,” the one engendered by maternal forgiveness, which is a very Japanese topic. Kosawa’s contribution to psychoanalysis earned him both the admiration from his disciples and every analyst’s gratitude for enriching our understanding of the many complex ties between infant and mother

