

## SHOFAR AND TOTEMISM: *A Freudian Lacanian approach*

*Bruno de Florence*

### *Introduction*

My interest in the shofar stems from a remark by Jacques Lacan<sup>1</sup> about a 1919 paper by Theodor Reik<sup>2</sup>. Reik was a very close collaborator of Sigmund Freud, with a strong interest in exploring the similarities between neurotic phenomena and what was then termed ‘the life of savages’, notably with regards to the form of their religious rituals. Having read a few years ago his autobiography<sup>3</sup>, I also knew that he had a strong interest in music, likening the act of listening to music to the act of the psychoanalyst listening to his patients. I therefore became curious as to what this unorthodox mind might have to say about this ancient sound device. And given the subject matter of Archaeomusicology, it seemed the ideal platform for my resulting observations.

For a description of the shofar and its physical and ritual characteristics, I refer the reader to the excellent presentations made by Max Stern<sup>4</sup> and Malcolm Miller<sup>5</sup>, included in the present volume.

---

1 Lacan, J., *Le séminaire, Livre 10, L’Angoisse* séance du 22 mai 1963, Seuil, (2004), Paris.

2 Reik, Th., *The Shofar* (1919), in *Ritual: Four Psychoanalytical Studies* (1946), tr. Douglas Bryan, Evergreen Edition, (1962), pp. 221-361. I have kept the original spelling.

3 Reik, Th., *Fragment of a great confession: a psychoanalytic autobiography*, Greenwood Press, (1973).

4 Shofar: Sound, Shape and Symbol, paper presented at ICONEA 2012.

5 The music of the Shofar: ancient symbols, modern meanings, paper presented at ICONEA 2012.

Briefly speaking, the shofar is a tubular contraption made from the horn of an animal. It is used at specific Judaic ceremonial occasions. The sounds produced through blowing delineate an interval of a fifth, either in a long duration or in rapid succession.

With this paper, I am hoping to demonstrate how Archaeomusicology can intersect in a fruitful manner with other disciplines, such as anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, semiotics and, perhaps surprisingly, psychoanalysis.

I shall first situate the notion of totemism, then give an account of Reik’s paper and propose further elaborations issuing from his remarks.

### *My Variables*

Before I proceed, it seems important to me that I declare my variables, or the characteristics of the position from which I ‘sound my shofar’. I find that it is often the case that hypothesis presented by musicologists rely on a particular and implicit epistemological framework, which is assumed to be shared and agreed upon by all. Hence perhaps the misunderstandings which can sometimes pepper academic debates.

My position stems from the field of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, and in particular its semiotic aspect. There are other psychoanalytical practices, such as Freudian, Jungian or Kleinian. The Freudian-Lacanian text does not consider the psychical as a unity, nor does it abide to the mind/body division of traditional philosophy and psychology. Operating from that field, we obtain very unusual categories and perspectives.

Let us ask ourselves the following: are we at any time aware or conscious of everything we have been aware of so far? Evidently no. We are able to remember some of it as we need it, sometimes with an effort on our part, some of it we never remember, such as the first few years of life, while at other times memories present themselves to our awareness of their own accord. We can therefore ask ourselves where those memories are when we are not conscious of them. Freud’s answer was to postulate a psychical made of several parts:

conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious<sup>6</sup>. The first unusual consequence is that the conscious can be considered as an organ of perception, with all the thinking occurring in the unconscious, the pre-conscious being a bridge between the two, where memory-traces are associated with word-presentations, verbal, visual or otherwise, such as colours in the case of synaesthesia. The second unusual consequence is that the unconscious cannot be directly known, as there is an unbridgeable gap or border at the point where it intersects with both pre-conscious and conscious.

There is therefore a qualitative difference between unconscious content and its conscious representation, through an inevitable but necessary transformation through what Freud termed condensation and displacement, and which Lacan showed to be equivalent to the structural linguistics categories of metaphor and metonymy. The third consequence is that what pushes an unconscious signifier to become consciously represented (or a conscious one to become unconscious) is an energy intrinsically linked to the body, called libido or drive, a category akin to that of motive force in physics. This Freudian category has the advantage of bypassing the mind/body division while retaining its components, since both mind and body are manifestations of libido.

Overall, each of the three parts of the psychical reacts on one another as their states change. As an illustration, we should therefore think of a container which acts on its content, and of a content which acts on its container, and that this interaction conditions present, past and future states of both container and content. For this reason, I find it useful to represent the psychical as a Moebius strip or a Klein bottle, a four dimensional equivalent of the Moebius strip.

Another way to talk about the psychical is to consider that the perception process is a three steps operation: the sensory phenomenon as it reaches our senses, its inscription on the psychical in the form of a memory-trace or signifier, and the effect of the inscription, on past, existing and

future ones<sup>7</sup>. So much so that when I say 'I really like/dislike this music', what I am saying is that I like/dislike the effect the perception of this music has on my psychical. This effect itself reacts onto past, existing and future 'likes/dislikes'.

### *Totemism*

Being part of Reik's argument, I will present the notion of totemism as it was understood in the days of Freud and Reik, so as to better contextualise Reik's observations and findings, and also because Freud had himself elaborated on this notion in *Totem and Taboo*<sup>8</sup>. We will see how this particular essay can still have an import on present days, through the elaborations Lacan constructed around it, notably the category of The-Name-of-The-Father<sup>9</sup>. I have therefore sourced definitions from James Frazer's *Totemism*<sup>10</sup>, which Freud had read. I am fully aware that Levi-Strauss and other structural anthropologists have since elaborated a more incisive definition of totemism.

*'A totem is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relation.'*

The totem appears to be an attractor which turns what is initially an undifferentiated collection into an organised class, as well as creating a relationship between the members of the class. At that stage, it has two axes:

*'The connexion between a man and his totem is mutually beneficent; the totem protects the man, and the man shows his respect for the totem in various ways, by not killing him if it be an animal, and not cutting him or gathering it if it be a plant. As distinguished from a fetich, a totem is never an isolated individual, but always a class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants, more rarely a class of inanimate natural objects, very rarely a class of artificial objects.'*

<sup>6</sup> Freud, S., *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Standard Edition, Vol. 4, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, S., *Letter 52 to Fliess* (1896), Standard Edition, Vol. 1, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

<sup>8</sup> Freud, S., *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Standard Edition, Vol. 13, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

<sup>9</sup> Lacan, J., *Des noms-du-père*, Seuil, (2005), Paris.

<sup>10</sup> Frazer, J., *Totemism*, Adam & Charles Black, Edinburgh, 1887. A facsimile of this original edition is available on [www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com). In quoting the excerpts, I have kept the original spelling and punctuation.

The totem-man axis is symmetrical, with the totem end of the axis being surrounded by a taboo or interdiction. What becomes a totem is an object originally belonging to the natural world. It is therefore an analogon or metaphor of the cosmos. This is why, perhaps, it must preserve its transcendental position by never dying. The distinction with the fetish is an important one, the choice of the object which serves a fetish being contingent and its use being strictly personal.

Frazer then proceeds to distinguish three kinds of totems:

*'...the clan totem, common to a whole clan, and passing by inheritance from generation to generation.'*

This first totem seems to generate a time differentiation by designating the next generation as being the one who will inherit it.

*'...the sex totem, common either to all males or to all the females of a tribe, to the exclusion in either case of the other sex.'*

This second totem creates a logical and reciprocal differentiation with regards to sexuation<sup>11</sup> in that by creating a Non-A, it also allows the creation of an A. Each of those two terms cannot be conceived of without the other. At this stage, we can point out one of Lacan's best known aphorism: 'the signifier takes its sense only from its relationship to another signifier<sup>12</sup>', and the attendant category of chain of signifiers.

*'...the individual totem, belonging to a single individual and not passing to his descendants.'*

Here a further differentiation is created, that between group and individual.

Frazer then concludes his introduction by stating that totemism is both a religious (mutual respect and protection between a man and his totem) and a social system (relations of the clansmen to each other and to men of other clans).

This particular observation may well contribute

11 This Lacanian term seems to me preferable to that of gender, as it takes into account the relationship between the biological and the psychical. See Richard Klein, *The Birth of Gender*, Psychoanalytical Notebooks 11, LS-NLS, London, 2003.

12 Lacan, J., *Du sujet enfin en question* (1966), Écrits I, Seuil, Paris, (1999). 'Le signifiant n'a de sens que de sa relation à un autre signifiant'. My translation.

to explain the importance for aristocratic castes of being able to trace their lineage, and the frequent use of animal figures in their heraldry.

Reik

I will now present a summary of Reik's arguments, together with my comments.

*'Since 17 August A.D., all instruments have disappeared, except the shofar. It has retained its simplicity in that it can only emit one sound. It is always curved, and any animal's horn can be used, except the bull's, so as to avoid awakening the memory of the golden calf<sup>13</sup>. Hebrew language has two words for 'horn': Keren, which has given cornu (Latin), and Jobel, from which the name Jobal is derived. The name of the instrument is close to the name of its inventor<sup>14</sup>.'*

The interdict surrounding the bull and the link between the name of an instrument and the name of its inventor (similar to the nature of the totemic link described by Frazer) are the first pointers towards a possible totemic context.

The sound of the shofar is associated with:

- Signal of danger<sup>15</sup>.
- Terrifying the enemy.
- Sin (New Year's day + Day of Atonement).
- Judgement Day.
- Resurrection, as in Isaiah 27:13.
- The monarch coronation<sup>16</sup> where the trumpet equals royalty in western music
- Excommunication, as in the case of Spinoza in 1656<sup>17</sup>.
- Showing repentance, remembrance and hope<sup>18</sup>.
- The coming of the Messiah.
- The sacrifice of Isaac.
- The funeral of Jewish dignitaries.
- A mean to assuage God<sup>19</sup>.
- To confuse the devil<sup>20</sup>.

Nowadays, it is confined to the religious sphere, and its religious purposes are to obtain God's mercy and, in the days of Jewish mysticism of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, to confuse Satan.

13 It would appear that this word is a mistranslation for 'young bull'.

14 Reik, Th., *The Shofar* (1919), op. cit., pp. 227-229.

15 Ibidem, p. 230.

16 We have here a possible explanation as to why, in Western classical music, the trumpet is always associated with royalty.

17 In this instance, the shofar expresses the wrath of God.

18 Reik, Th., *The Shofar* (1919), op. cit., p. 243.

19 Ibidem, p. 240.

20 Ibidem, p. 241.

There are some incongruities in Exodus 19:

*'A horn is to sound, but who is to blow it? The sound of the horn becomes louder and louder, Moses speaks and God answers loudly. Why the accompanying noise? The people see the smoking mountain, hear the sound of the horn and are terrified and afraid. This very same people assert that they have heard God's voice; but they have only heard the sound of the trumpet.'*

These disparities can be resolved if it is assumed that the sound of the horn is God's voice<sup>21</sup>.

The reason for the choice of a ram's horn to make a shofar can be linked to the presence of horned gods in totemism. The origins of Judaism as a religion are to be found in totemism. Indeed, throughout the Ancient Orient, gods are worshipped as bulls or rams<sup>22</sup>. In support of the assertion in the last sentence, we find in Daniel 8:20:

*'The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia'*<sup>23</sup>.

In the KEŠ temple hymn<sup>24</sup>, we find the following references to animals in connection with the royal household: bull, ox, breed-bull, bison, stag, wild sheep, deer, viper, pelican, lion, stags, white bull.

We also find a reference to 'reaching to the heavens', which can be interpreted as growing up as tall as the father, or becoming as powerful as the father so as to be able to reach his dwelling, just as Christ ascended to heaven and sat at the right of his father.

There is also a curious assertion which appears to be contradictory:

*'Draw near, man, to the city--but do not draw near, man, to the house Kec, to the city--but do not draw near!'. We seem to have an interdict similar to the one in Exodus 19:12: 'Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death.'*

21 Ibidem, p. 250.

22 Ibidem., p. 253.

23 I am thankful to Richard Dumbrill for having pointed out this particular source. All biblical quotes are from the King James version, currently in public domain.

24 As above. The text in its English translation was lifted from The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, on <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>, accessed November 2012.

..itself similar to the interdicts surrounding the totem as described by Frazer. In other words, wanting to acquire knowledge of what has been designated as a totem is not a good idea, and the Oedipus myth may well be a metaphor of this advice, most especially when taken together with its complement myth, the taboo on incest. Another parallel can be drawn with the Acteon myth, who having seen Diana naked while in the form of a stag, an animal with horns, was torn to pieces and devoured by his own hunting dogs. In a private conversation, Richard Dumbrill mentioned Saint Hubert, patron saint of hunters, who saw a crucifix in the antlers of a stag, while hearing a voice exhorting him to renounce his too worldly life. Lastly, the English proverb 'curiosity kills the cat' comes to mind.

*'The ram is a totem, drawing its special holiness from being an expiatory sacrifice for guilt. An animal's horns are a symbol of power and strength. The fact of the devil's horns points to an earlier practice of demon's cult.'*

*'Priests wearing horns or an animal's skin or mask points to an identification with the deity'*<sup>25</sup>. *This identification is with both the form (animal) and its sound, produced either by an instrument or by a human voice.*

*'In the primitive horde the sons overcame, killed and devoured the potent father; this literal incorporation was the most primitive kind of identification with the beloved and hated man.'*

Since Reik's first presented his paper to an assembly of psychoanalysts, his audience would have been well acquainted with the categories of identification and of the father of the primitive horde. The latter is the central thesis in Freud's Totem and Taboo<sup>26</sup>. We need therefore to explicit them.

The psychoanalytical concept of identification consists in behaving, without realising it, like someone else. In Freud's own words:

*'Identification is known to psycho-analysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person... A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere. We may say simply that he*

25 Reik, Th., *The Shofar* (1919), op. cit., p. 356.

26 Freud, S., *Totem and Taboo* (1913), op. cit.

*takes his father as his ideal.*<sup>27</sup>

This ‘to be like him’ is realised by borrowing a particular trait or mannerism from the ideal person. In one of Freud’s early cases, a young woman had ‘borrowed’ a coughing habit from her mother, expressing the unconscious wish to take her place besides her father<sup>28</sup>. The most common case of identification occurs when we fall in love, borrowing traits from the love object. The phenomenon of group identification consists in the collective libido of the group being directed towards a single individual, whereby ‘each individual is bound by libidinal ties on the one hand to the leader (Christ, the Commander-in-Chief<sup>29</sup>) and on the other hand to the other members of the group<sup>30</sup>. We have here a similarity with the two totemic axis defined by Frazer.

As for the devouring of the father by his sons, Freud presents the following hypothesis: at the dawn of humanity, there was a primitive horde lead by a tyrannical father, who kept all the women for himself. The sons, or band of brothers, united in revolt, killed and devoured the father, thus incorporating his strength<sup>31</sup>. However, remorse set in which lead to the sons showing the obedience, love and respect which were the father’s dues towards a substitute animal. In order to avoid a recurrence of an all-powerful father, it was decided that sexual union would only be permitted with women from outside the horde. The periodic totem meal is a group re-enactment in order to share and thus dilute the guilt<sup>32</sup>, and also serves as a reminder of the fate which anyone tempted to set himself up as a tyrant can expect.

<sup>27</sup> Freud, S., *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Standard Edition, Vol. 18, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

<sup>28</sup> Freud, S., *Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria* (1905), Standard Edition, Vol. 7, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

<sup>29</sup> To which, in 2012, we may add immensely successful pop singers such as the late Michael Jackson, Justin Bieber or the The Beatles at the apex of their fame.

<sup>30</sup> Freud, S., *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> It is said that cannibals only ate the people they loved.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:24 comes to mind: ‘eat, this is my body, drink, this is my blood.’

We have here an interesting hypothesis for the origin of exogamy, and by implication, for the circulation of goods and ideas, as well as for alliances between different tribes.

The blowing of the shofar by the priest is a multi-faceted phenomenon:

- *An identification with God.*
- *A reminder of the primal crime.*
- *An awakening of the guilty conscience.*
- *An awakening of the subsequent remorse.*
- *A promise to never do it again, that is to keep in check unconscious hostile impulses.*
- *A sound reminder of the cry of the father when he was murdered.*

The imitation of the roar of an animal allows for the invocation of the presence of God.

We have here a similarity with ancient lyres, whereby each string is named after a god, and its striking is considered as equivalent to invoking his presence on earth. We find the same principle in some of Bach’s works using two hocketing choirs, disposed in such a way so as to fill the church with music and evoke the presence of the divinity<sup>33</sup>.

*The shofar must be in perfect condition just as sacrificed animal must be free from defects. There is a relationship between music or sound and eroticism, such as the practice of serenading.’*

In that context, it is therefore not surprising that most of contemporary pop music consists of love ballads. A case in point is the enormous success once enjoyed by the American singer Barry White, in particular with female audiences<sup>34</sup>. His lyrics of promises of endless sensual pleasures delivered in a low baritone voice, coupled with a gentle version of Jazz-Funk rhythms made him the king of crooners throughout the 1970’s. In addition, I also was able to demonstrate<sup>35</sup> that emotions resulting from musical activities could be considered as a release of libido throughout the body.

*‘ Through the sounding of the shofar, God is resurrected as a forgiving god. HE will help the sons if they renounce hostility. It allows for what psychoanalysis calls a compromise formation, the manifestation of an original unconscious impulse in a modified form,*

<sup>33</sup> For instance, Bach’s motet *Komm, Jesus, Komm*, BWV 229.

<sup>34</sup> See the official site, [www.barrywhite.com](http://www.barrywhite.com).

<sup>35</sup> 1st February 2012, Institute of Musical Research, London, UK.

## SHOFAR AND TOTEMISM

but with its accompanying affect intact. The impulse is discharged without any risk for anyone.'

'In Jewish mysticism, the sound of horn confusing Satan is a metaphor of keeping self-reproaches at bay. In the case of the shofar sounded during an excommunication ritual, it is God's voice as a threat of death.'

If correct, this hypothesis can be used to explain why marching to the scaffold was accompanied by beating drums, or why drums were used on the battlefield, most especially if we keep in mind that a drum has the skin of an animal as one of its components.

*'The silence during the blowing of the shofar and relief when the ceremony is over is a confession followed by expiation. The congregation is forgiven and therefore saved for another year, as in the Adonis celebration at Antioch<sup>36</sup>.'*

The importance of the cyclical aspect of 'another year' in human affairs has been thoroughly explored by Mircea Eliade<sup>37</sup>. We need only to think of the role of pharaohs in Ancient Egypt with regards to their role in ensuring that the Nile would flood *once more*, and thus make another crop possible. In 2012, Queen Elisabeth II of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland pledged herself once more to the well-being of her people in her Diamond jubilee speech.

We could also think of the enormous importance given to the celebration, throughout Christianity, of Christ's birth, death and resurrection, in which we also have an association with an animal, the lamb<sup>38</sup>. Not to mention the enormous enthusiasm which welcomes the New Year, and by implication, a corresponding enthusiasm linked to having survived the previous year.

*'There are numerous myths of rebellious sons also described as inventors of arts and sciences, such as Maryas or Appolo<sup>39</sup>. More generally, there is a recurring motif of a song-god offending a father-god.'*

*The ram is the father of those who make music, and music itself is an imitation of the paternal voice through the imitation of sounds*

---

36 Reik, Th., *The Shofar* (1919), op. cit., p. 272.

37 Eliade, M., *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992.

38 In France, the Easter meal traditionally consists of lamb.

39 Reik, Th., *The Shofar* (1919), op. cit., p. 280.

*of animals worshipped as totems.*

*In the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham displaces his own wish to kill his son onto God the father, and that itself is a displacement of Abraham's youthful wish to kill his own father.'*

An equivalent can be found if we reverse the Christian myth of God the father sacrificing his son. In the clinic of psychoanalysis, syntactic reversals are the most common occurrences of censorship, whereby the intensity of an ideational content is displaced so that it can gain access to the conscious<sup>40</sup>.

*'In Australian puberty rites, young men told they will be sacrificed to or devoured by Halum, a mysterious monster. At the last moment, pigs are substituted in their place. Those rites also feature a sound, that of a bull-roarer. It is the voice of the spirit which will devour or circumcise the youth and warn them to obey the rules of the society (of adults) they are about to join. They have to renounce their anti-social drives<sup>41</sup>. The bull-roarer is a sacred instrument, is carefully kept in a special place (the male club house) and is only used on special occasions.'*

Freud's version of this admonition and of its consequences, if it is not obeyed, is the Oedipus myth.

*'Guilt creates a law concerning the preservation of the totem, in the form of a prohibition against killing and devouring the father. Music is here the representative of morality<sup>42</sup>. The psychic tension which cannot be mentally overcome leads to music, by imitation of sounds, and to dance, by imitation of movement<sup>43</sup>.'*

*The importance of music and dance in religious rituals is to retain and enjoy the victory over the father, as for instance in the rituals of the feast of Dionysus, or the funeral rites of the son-god. Dance is originally an expression of triumph.*

*In mourning rituals, lamentations and howlings are obligatory. They are a disguise of the triumph of having overcome father.*

*An equivalent to the shofar sound is the shrieking and blowing into one's own fists.'*

---

40 Freud, S., *Negation* (1925), Standard Edition, Vol. 19, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

41 Reik, Th., *The Shofar* (1919), op. cit., p. 290.

42 Ibid., p. 294.

43 Ibid., p. 298.

*Elaborations*

We could be forgiven in thinking that Reik's explanation for the origin of the shofar is pretty much a fairy tale, similarly to Freud's story of a tyrannical father of a primitive horde, most especially in the absence of any historical evidence. We must however remember that Freud and his colleagues used the categories available in their days, so that if we look at those myths as metaphors, we can extract an organising nexus.

In some remote mythical time, *something* so horrendous occurred that it was necessary to forget it and at the same time, make sure it could not happen again by preserving it *in absentia*. We have here at work the very mechanism of repression, whereby an idea and its representation become unconscious (hidden from awareness), while its influence continues to manifest itself, sometimes in the form of a compulsive and displaced action.

The reason for this repression or censorship is that the idea is profoundly distasteful to our moral sense and, if acted upon, could have catastrophic consequences. This is equivalent to putting limitations to what a human being is capable of under certain circumstances. Moreover, these limits are transmitted from generation to generation, as in puberty rites<sup>44</sup>, in which young males are warned to renounce their anti-social impulses, in order for society to continue to exist in a coherent form.

Those rites re-enact over and over again the original crime together with its punishment. The one is not separable from the other. In that context, it is logical to hypothesize that subsequent metonymic trans-formations of those rituals gave rise to tragedy, music, poetry for the purpose of their transmission, presumably in an oral form, since the main characteristic of a ritual is to be performed. We can also consider that the most important consequence of putting limits into place with regards to the rules of sexual union is that of exogamy, itself linked to the exchange and circulation of goods and ideas. Therefore our societies, based as they are on exchange, are possible only because of that separation from that mythical something.

<sup>44</sup> Reik, Th., *The Puberty Rites of Savages, in Ritual: Four Psychoanalytical Studies*, tr. Douglas Bryan, Evergreen Edition, (1962), pp.91-166.

If the sound of the shofar is the voice of the totem, that is God's voice or the cries of the father being murdered, then the ceremony of the sounding of the shofar can be considered as a semiotic system. Actuality becomes a virtuality, or a set of signifiers whose articulation is aimed at circumscribing and regulating the use of youthful strength, by transforming it into a constructive force. Hence the relief experienced by the congregation when the shofar ceremony is over, as noted by Reik, with its accompanying feeling that it will survive for another year, since it is protected from potentially lethal forces. The totem can be seen as a primal signifier, from which all other signifiers can then be created through metaphor or metonymy, since the clan and its individuals derive their names from the totem's own name.

Lacan called that semiotic aspect the Symbolic, and following in the footsteps of Merleau-Ponty<sup>45</sup>, proposed that it has an a-priori organising aspect. When I visit a museum, it is not the museum I see but a space and its objects as organised by its curators. While the space is visible, the curators are invisible and must remain so, in order not to disturb my field of vision. The same principle seems to be at work concerning the totem in that it cannot be approached, and therefore cannot be known.

We can therefore say that we always see (or hear) according to what I term a coherence field, which organises in advance our vision (or hearing), and more generally, any of our perceptions<sup>46</sup>. Therefore, it cannot be said that a perception is the sensorium which impinges on our senses, and this why the same phenomenon seen by ten different persons will give rise to ten markedly varied accounts, since they are organised by ten different Symbolics. What is perceived is not an object from the sensorium, but a group of psychical inscriptions in their interactions with existing memory-traces. This is why for Freud, knowledge is always retro-active and susceptible to be re-arranged in order to produce a different effect, and it is what allows Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis

<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Routledge, tr. Donald Landes, Oxon, (2012).

<sup>46</sup> The diatonic scale contained within an octave, or the category of consonance and dissonance of Western music are other examples of such coherence fields.

to be a 'talking cure'<sup>47</sup>. It considers symptoms to be semiotic or language events intersecting with the body. By redefining the category of perception, we can see that the truth value of a perception lies in its effect or organising power, not in its adequation with the sensorium, and as a result, we are free to concentrate on its internal semiotic logic.

From this position, we gain a different perspective on tattoos, scarification and circumcision, and more generally, on rituals. Whatever the rules of matrimony maybe in different clans, they are all true in their effects in that the end result will be an alliance between two different kinships, and the continuation of life. Similarly, the throwing of a shoe at a person in Islamic culture has the same effect as showing the middle finger in Mediterranean culture, it is intended to manifest contempt.

If we consider the category of the totem as pure fiction, it is nevertheless a necessary one. If a totem can exist, it is because of the credence given to it by humans, who in turn, receive existence from being assigned a place and a nomination among their fellow human beings which renders each of them unique. Their totality then becomes a clan, tribe or community, itself distinctly unique from other clans. The totem therefore does not exist *per se* in a void, but as an effect. It allows passing from the dimension of the cardinal to the dimension of the ordinal, and propels an organism into the dimension of social existence. We can surmise that this is what is enacted in the ritual of the Roman Catholic mass during the consecration and the rite of peace. During the consecration, the bread and the wine change into Christ's body and blood, a thinly veiled disguise of the totemic meal. This allow for the recognition of each member of the congregation as a particular individual thanks to the rite of peace, whereby members turn to and greet one another by shaking hands<sup>48</sup>.

Another interpretation is possible if we take into account the breath aspect of sounding the shofar.

In the womb, the human foetus does not need to breathe nor to feed, since oxygen and nutrients are brought directly to it. At birth, the very first phenomenon which occurs is the kicking into place of the autonomous breathing system. For the very first time since gestation, a baby is confronted to the outside, which is not a passive but an invading outside, as it takes its very first breath. As a rule, it is accompanied by a cry. We have no way to assert if the cry is one of distress or joy or even boredom. Staying at the level of the phenomenon, we can nevertheless surmise that the cry is a discharge reaction to the raising of what is most certainly an enormous level of excitation resulting from the sensations of breathing and the inwards rush of air, and the sensations from the internal movements of the lungs. Those sensations will be inscribed onto the psychical as memory-traces. I am therefore proposing that this very first memory of birth is the mythical past from which we must detach ourselves in order to look forward. Limiting the amount of libidinal investment present in that particular signifier allows us to have libido available for other purposes. It is therefore not by chance that a blowing implement such as a ram's horn was original chosen, since breath must be blown into it to obtain a sound, and for this it has to be put into contact with the lips. Another component for that choice may well be that the animal to which the horns are attached is also perceived as powerful, like the murdered all powerful father, and taking away its horns is in itself a test of endurance for the assailant<sup>49</sup>. This allows us to contextualise the importance in Judaism of the concept of vital breath, whereby the mouth is seen as 'a valve of communication between the living body and the soulless one', as well as the concept of the Kiss of God, or death by the mouth of God, the gentlest way possible to die<sup>50</sup>. Breathing, life and death constitute an irreducible tri-partite category, with life and death being mediated by breathing. There is also the importance in Roman Catholicism

47 Freud, S., *Five lectures on psycho-analysis* (1910), Standard Edition, Vol. 11, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

48 The rite of peace has replaced the more ancient Holy Kiss as a form of greeting, whereby Christians used to greet one another with a kiss. See 2 Corinthians 13:12.

49 I am grateful to Lacanian psychoanalyst Julia Evans for having brought this point to my attention.

50 Massimo, L., *Signs of the Soul: toward a Semiotics of Religious Subjectivity*, Department of Philosophy, University of Turin. Unpublished essay, on [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu), accessed November (2012).

of bearing witness to the last breath of a dying person. It is considered a privilege. By going back to the Freudian text<sup>51</sup>, we can see that the idea of youthful strength can be taken as a metaphor of libido. Unbound or free floating libido is a source of anxiety<sup>52</sup>, in that it can dissolve our sense of unity, and it is the function on the Ego part of the psychical apparatus to bind libido to signifiers, stabilise its flow<sup>53</sup> and divert it towards higher aims than its immediate gratification. Moreover, although the aim of libido is to attain discharge and thus return to a lower level of excitation, Freud realised from his clinical experience and to his great astonishment that it could never attain full discharge, in complete contradiction with the laws of Newtonian physics<sup>54</sup>. Thus full satisfaction, which consist of getting rid of all unpleasure or tension, is impossible. Taken in its economic dimension, the drive is therefore always an excess. Lacan extrapolated on this aspect of the drive by saying that there is a hole in the Symbolic, and denoted this excess *jouissance*<sup>55</sup>, a category which opens the way for a third elaboration. Rather than allowing *jouissance* to fall back directly on society and dissolve the social bond, as in the case of war for instance, or to evacuate it outside of society towards an unpredictable destination, as in the phenomenon of the scapegoat, it can be redirected towards the Symbolic itself, thus allowing for the creation of new Symbolics and semiotic systems. This is what the necessity of detaching ourselves from that mythical horrendous something could be construed as. From the fascination for total *jouissance* to its representation via the totem, its first metonymy, to further metonymies such as the murder of the primal father, religion, tragedy,

poetry, music and the arts in general, exogamy and the systems of kinship. The myth of the taboo on incest is another representation of the necessity of that separation, which must be followed by an alienation: we must forget what the totem is in itself, hence the interdicts surrounding it, as well as the displacement of what it stands for onto an animal. This separation/alienation function was called by Lacan 'The-Name-of-the-Father'<sup>56</sup>. Its effect is to knot together the different parts of the psychical. It can be carried out by a parent or any figure of authority such as the church, the army, a gang, an activity or a professional body. It allows a human organism to become a body in its own right, and to participate in the circuit of exchange without fear of dissolution into the undifferentiated wholeness of *jouissance*. The Christian myth of the exile from paradise and its consequences can be construed as a metaphor of 'The-Name-of-the-Father'.

Cosmogony myths seem to always postulate the existence of humanity as the result of a cut performed on an initial state of undifferentiation, or as the result of a divinity sacrificing itself or part of itself. Space is separated from time, the sky from the earth, the land from the sea, day from night. Not even the Western scientific story of the Big Bang escapes this aspect. Let's also note that moralists, since the days of Classical Greece, have concentrated their efforts on temperance, or the management of pleasure<sup>57</sup>. Some pleasure is fine, but not too much and inside a certain framework, perhaps realising that we seem to have an inborn tendency to excess, to the detriment of being.

Freud postulated two qualities for the drive or libido: a uniting aspect or Eros, allowing us to build larger cultural ensembles, and an exact opposite, Thanatos, a tendency for the drive to go back to its original inanimate state, or death<sup>58</sup>. In turn, we can postulate Thanatos as a destruction or disassembling drive, thus reflecting what happens at the biological level, for instance with the phenomenon of constant cell division. Internally, the human body is the siege of incessant

51 Freud, S., *Totem and Taboo*, op. cit.

52 Freud, S., *Letter 14 to Fliess-Draft E* (1894), Standard Edition, Vol. 1, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

53 Freud, S., *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Standard Edition, Vol. 19, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

54 Freud, S., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Standard Edition, Vol. 18, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London.

55 Originally a legal French term, which aims at distinguishing ownership from the enjoyment of owning. In English translations of the Lacanian text, this term is usually left as is, or is sometimes translated as 'enjoyment'. At the time I was writing this essay, the Seminar 7 Lacan Reading Group, organised by ICONEA, pointed to the English term 'bliss' as used by Chaucer.

56 Le nom-du-père.

57 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, OUP Oxford, (2005).

58 Freud, S., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), op. cit.

movements of unity and dis-unity<sup>59</sup>, as if there was a heterogeneous force silently at work, similar to Hegel's concept of Negativity, the often forgotten fourth term of his dialectics. As soon some unity is achieved, it is immediately dissolved for a new unity to be rebuilt. Nevertheless, we manage to maintain a consistent imago of ourselves, to both ourselves and others. This is achieved through an act of alienation, whereby we take as true our image as reflected by a mirror, whether it is an actual mirror or a mirror made from the words of an other. We can now see how the entire ceremony of the shofar can be considered as such a mirror, binding as it does the entire community together, and neutralising the inherent Negativity which Reik denoted as being young men's hostile impulses towards their fathers, by turning it into a socially acceptable semiotic practice, for instance a religious ceremonial. More generally, we could hypothesize that religious forms act as sponges soaking up both the destruction drive and its attendant guilt, as reflected in John 1:29:

‘...Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world’.

In this particular example and as brilliantly outlined by Freud, the death drive is displaced onto an animal, the animal is then sacrificed, and in a second stage, regretted and mourned in a most expressive and demonstrative manner. This act protects us from the destructive violence of the drive, allowing us to survive one more year.

#### *Incorporation*

We saw earlier how an act of incorporation, which after all is an act of cannibalism, creates *ex-nihilo* the totem. In turn, the totemic object regulates love and procreation as well as competition, and appoints those linked to it to a unique place. It names them as social beings belonging to a network of relationships. This is what characterises the Lacanian category of ‘The-Name-of-the-Father’ as evoked earlier on. It not only binds us with one another, just like Christians are ‘Brothers in Christ’, it also can be

<sup>59</sup> As an amusing illustration of this fact, I refer the Francophone reader to Gaston Ouvrad's 1932 song *Je ne suis pas bien portant*, (Lyrics by Géo Koger, music by Vincent Scotto).

seen as binding the signifier and the signified, while maintaining their distinctness, an essential function for a sign to exist. It also performs a cut from the fascination of a primordial jouissance, forcing us on the road to a metonymic satisfaction.

One question remains: why should the ‘voice of God’ be a voice? In turn, this raises other questions: why should its Judaic emblem, the shofar, be a sound contraption and not a visual one for instance? Why should God's admonitions take the form of speech? And what is it that is so specific to speech that it can have such an imperative element? Although God's Ten Commandments were written down, they were initially voice dictated. On hearing the shofar on a New Year's Day ceremony, Reik had remarked that he ‘...could not completely avoid the emotion which these four crude, fearsome, moaning, loud-sounding, and long-drawn-out sounds produced<sup>60</sup>, also noticing that the same effect was experienced by Christians alike. Lacan also commented on the ‘deeply moving and emotional character<sup>61</sup>’ of the sound of shofar, independently of the level of faith and repentance of the congregation. Early on, Freud had remarked on the imperative character of verbal hallucinations. While they pester a subject, they also talk about him in an impersonal manner using the third person, and are experienced as coming from another place<sup>62</sup>. They are not experienced as coming from the subject's own psychical. This is quite different from the silent verbal speech which occurs while reading or thinking, and from the little voice of conscience which tells us that it is naughty to have an extra portion of chocolate fudge. We know that it originates from within us, that it is ours, and it addresses us rather than command us.

A pointer is given by Lacan when he mentions, with respect to the sound of the shofar, ‘the mysterious paths of the auricular affect<sup>63</sup>’. This

<sup>60</sup> Reik, Th., *The Shofar* (1919), in *Ritual: Four Psychoanalytical Studies*, op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> Lacan, J., *Le séminaire, Livre 10, L'Angoisse* (séance du 22 mai 1963), op. cit.

<sup>62</sup> Freud, S., *Psycho-analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia* (1911), Standard Edition, Vol. 12, tr. James Strachey, Vintage, (1999), London. Also known as the Schreber case.

<sup>63</sup> Lacan, J., *Le séminaire, Livre 10, L'Angoisse* (séance du 22 mai 1963), op. cit. ‘les voies mystérieuses de l'affect proprement auriculaire’, my translation.

refers to the libidinal investment of the ear, which marks it as different from the organ of the ear, and thus refers to the function of hearing, whereby the ear is in a field of *jouissance* modulated by the Symbolic of verbal speech. This is in accord with two of Reik's earlier remarks. Firstly, the emotion produced in the listener by the sound of shofar. Secondly, the sound of the shofar as an identification with God. In both instances of emotion and identification, we have libido as a common factor. Lacan's remark about the libidinal affect circulating through the ear is therefore fully justified, and since incorporation is also an act of love, it also falls under the concept of libido.

But is incorporation necessarily an act of cannibalism? Could it be described in another way? What exactly is incorporated? Acts of actual cannibalism in daily life are very rare, and yet the psychoanalytical clinic frequently talk of incorporation.

I shall propose that it can indeed be described otherwise, if we consider the phenomenon of hypnopompic speech in infants a few months old, well before speech age, whereby they seem to have a monologue with themselves, repeating bits of speech in the act of falling asleep. What is repeated is what has been heard, what has been incorporated through the ear, since the ear cannot be closed, except through an active act of will, which an infant cannot perform. It is therefore the speech which comes from an other human being which allows an infant to acquire its own speech and consequently to exist to itself as well as to others.

Both ear and mouth are resonators, resulting in a circuit which goes from the mouth of the adult to the ear of the infant and back to the ear of the adult, with a detour via the infant's own mouth and ear. At a later stage, during the infant's first conscious attempts at speech, the adult will repeat what the infant has said before giving an actual reply. It is a kind of sonic forth and go which facilitates speech learning for the infant but also his integration in the human world. Speech, including our own, always comes from the outside. It is therefore experienced as an otherness. This is what allows a 'Non-I' to be deployed alongside of an 'I', thus creating a first

pair of signifiers which, through a combinatorial process, will engender signification.

The sounding of the shofar is therefore the voice of an other, a particular other, whether he be Jaweh, the murdered father or the emperor of Sirius B. Its richness in odd harmonics<sup>64</sup>, or its 'crude' character as noted by Reik, keeps it away from the musical domain, allowing it to remain anchored in the domain of speech. This is why I would not classify the shofar as a musical instrument, but as a sound contraption, for in the beginning was the Verb.

### *Conclusion*

Working within the framework of Archaeo-musicology, which so far has been to look beyond the Hellenistic period as a point of departure for musicology, we were able to take an interest into the shofar as an Aeolian instrument. By doing so, we stumbled upon the notion of totemism, which seems a quasi-universal feature of human societies. An alliance with Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis appeared as a logical and necessary step in order to expand our investigation and to attempt at formulating a structural description, since it is psychoanalysis which has revealed the unconscious foundations of our actions. In turn, this allowed us to hypothesize a link between religious rituals, animals and, surprisingly, artistic forms. Overall, we postulated the absolute necessity of an initial death or renunciation in order for life to continue to exist, and for this founding act to be periodically reaffirmed, given that in our contemporary societies production and reproduction are closely linked.

### *Addendum*

During the discussion at the time of this presentation, a very pertinent question was asked: 'Why did Reik only concerned himself with the sons and not the daughters? The answer I gave was that the Freudian-Lacanian text does not consider the structures of masculinity and femininity to be symmetrical. While there is an Oedipus complex,

<sup>64</sup> I was not able to procure the necessary software to analyse the partial content of the shofar sound. I have had to rely on my own experience as a musician to make this assertion.

## SHOFAR AND TOTEMISM

there is no Electra complex. Retrospectively, I find my answer very incomplete, and I shall attempt to elaborate on it further.

In a certain way, an explanation is already in the question, if we consider it to be a typical late 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century question. In the days of Freud and Reik, the destiny of a daughter was clearly outlined: she was to be married off to a man, bear his children and look after the household. There simply could not be any other outcome, and a daughter with a competitive spirit would have been characterised as odd, if not outright delusional. Also, under the Western patriarchal rule which allows inheritance from both mother and father, it would be the first son who would inherit the family's financial assets and social privileges. Hence, the impatience for the father to disappear in order to take his place could only emanate from the sons. Freud and Reik could only extrapolate from the social situations available to them.

After WWI, this 'order of things' was subject to deep changes, owing in the main to the independence gained by women while the men were away at war, having to replace them in factories, offices and at home. Women experienced what self-assertion and self-reliance was like, enjoyed it, and wanted more of it. Soon, they started shortening their hair and their dresses, smoked in public and spoke their mind. Freud himself encouraged women interested in psychoanalysis to take the reins of their own life, as was the case with his own daughter Anna, or his female collaborators such as Melanie Klein, Lou Andreas-Salomé or Princess of Greece Marie Bonaparte, although his own household was not exempt from a certain amount of strict patriarchy.

Nowadays, women are educated and encouraged to expect from life and society as much as men do, and this is guaranteed through legislation. If Reik was writing his shofar study today, I believe that he would have to take into account the fact that in the West, our current Symbolic(s) allow for the expression of competitiveness and aggression coming from women. For instance, both the British and American professional armies allow women to serve in their ranks, including on combat theatres. This does not mean that the female brand of competitiveness is symmetrical to that of the male,

as different objects are at stake. Women have the secret of reproduction, but are unable to say it. It does not therefore have a signifier and in that sense, women simple are. This secret can however be signified in a second-hand manner via the signifier of motherhood, potential or actual, for which the intervention of a male is necessary, whether as a genitor or a donor. And precisely, all men have in common that visible organ which allow them to recognise themselves and one another as males. In terms of totemism, we could say that men have a totem, while women do not.