

To what extent is the term “Jāhiliyya” an appropriate label to describe the milieu in which Islam emerged?

A Psycho-Social Interpretation of the Religious Construction of Jāhiliyya

As the post-revelation world of Arabia came to terms with Muhammed’s message *Jāhiliyya* emerged as the label used to describe the milieu which was antithetical to the Muslim community and definitions of the term ranged from Paganism to Barbarism, to a vaguer concept of a time with no prophet. The problem which, I believe, has contributed to this constant reimagining and reframing of *Jāhiliyya*, by both classical Muslim writers and modern historians, is that there exists in the word itself a fundamental conflict whereby the early writers made the decision (consciously or unconsciously) to use a pre-existing and value-neutral term to identify a categorically negative historical, moral and theological situation.

The centrality of religious scripture to this conflict with the past requires, I believe, an approach to the problem which incorporates theories from the study of religions as a heuristic tool. This may aid us in reconciling the differing visions of pre-Islamic Arabia which we find in, on the one hand, ‘*Jahili*’ poetry and, on the other, the Islamic theological writings. More than this, there emerges in the Islamic sources a fundamental ambiguity towards this epoch which needs to be understood in new terms. Specifically, using Freud¹ and Durkheim to analyse the processes by which society implants itself on to the psychology (read: spirit/soul) of both the individual and community we can understand how and why this conflict in historical identity emerged.

¹ There have of course been many critics of the Freudian theory of religion and I do not intend to utilise his grand, universal, myth of religions concerning a primordial parricide. Rather, I focus on his theory of Id, Ego and Superego which is the framework of human action and is coloured by society, culture and religion.

Writers such as Stetkevych have posited that the pre-Islamic, *Jahili* poetry can be seen as resembling ritual in form and structure and, with reference to Freud, we can read these rituals as a cathartic mechanism for the *Id* impulses of the later Islamic community and thereby understand the textual ambiguity which emerged.

Jāhiliyya is an elusive historical term. In a general and historiographical sense it can be conceived as describing the milieu into which Islam emerged, however, it can also be seen as an important theological concept which is set up as the antithesis to Islam. It is with this former meaning however that it has usually acquired resonance with historians as it seems to represent the time and people which gave birth to Islam and thus may hold the answer to one of the key questions of world-history; how did the religion proclaimed by Muhammed seemingly erupt unheralded from a relative socio-religious backwater and succeed in its extremely rapid campaigns of conversion and conquest? Of course the methodological problem here is that scholars in the Western tradition will inevitably proceed from a position of atheism and will reject revelation as either a verifiable or logical explanation for Islam. On the other hand, our primary sources for the period were constructed with either the direct or indirect aim of both promoting and explaining the revelation in light of the dominant cultural and spiritual position of Islam.²

Completely secular information about the pre-Islamic age can, therefore, seemingly only be inferred from contemporary sources which are unrelated to the religious telos of Islam or those which have been redacted atheistically from those later Muslim writings. The picture that emerges if we take the former as a basis for investigation is one of a ring of historical information surrounding Arabia with thin tendrils of inference criss-crossing the desert along those caravan routes which the sources necessitate.

² One of the sharpest criticisms of the sources and the need for an external approach is in: Crone, P. (2004) *Meccan Trade*. p.203-249. New Jersey. First Gorgias Press.

In the North, the socio-economic dynamic was characterised by the interaction and conflict between the two great-powers of the Near-East, namely, the Byzantine heirs of the Eastern Roman. The Romans had named the region which they had acquired from the ancient kingdom of the Nabataeans 'Arabia' and they, as well as the later Byzantine rulers, attempted to bring the inhabitants of the region and its immediate environs into the political sphere. This, inevitably, included Christian missionary activity throughout North and Western Arabia. Alongside these Imperial states we should place the two great North Arabian tribes Ghassan and Lakhm. Ghassan became affiliated to the Byzantine Empire and were practising Monophysite Christians while the Lakhmids were associated for the most part with the Persian Shah. These tribal 'kingdoms' thus served as a useful buffer zone and a significant source of contact with the peoples of the interior who were key to the safe passage of trade caravans from the South.

The Romans labelled this land as *Arabia Felix*, 'the happy' or 'the prosperous' as the merchandise valued by the aristocracy such as spices, perfumes and medicinal products were conveyed to the Mediterranean from this remote region. Culture flourished in the Yemen alongside agriculture and the various kingdoms which rose and fell (Sabaeans, Himyarite etc) established an impressive architectural and a written record³. Indeed, in the 1st century CE Strabo compared the Yemeni civilisation with that of Egypt.⁴

What lay in the middle of this ring of political machinations is another matter and, in historically verifiable terms, elusive to scholars.

³ Religion in the Yemen was, to a large degree, polytheistic, however in the 6th century the kingdom of Himyar became largely Jewish following the conversion of Dhu Nuwas. The subsequent migration of tribes from Yemen may explain the Arabic epigraphic record in the North and the apparent economic growth in the region between the 4th and 6th centuries which led to the evolution of Islam. Hoyland, R. 'Arab Kings, Arab Tribes.' in: (Eds) Hoyland, R. et al (2009) *From Hellenism to Islam*. p.385-386. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Strabo. *Geography*. XVI.iv.3. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/arabia1.asp#Strabo> (accessed 04/01/14)

Central Arabia is largely characterised by barren desert and sporadically occurring oases, while society for the most part was nomadic, subsisting by moving herds between and contesting amongst themselves for access to these sparse water resources. Sedentary life was rare, although it did exist, notably in caravan stations close to Yemen, the Northern Imperial borders and The *Hijaz*. What characterised this region above all however was tribal affiliations of kinship, hospitality and blood-feud. These connections served to bond the disparate society together and provided a certain system of social boundaries in place of the fixed political institutions found in the surrounding civilisations.⁵ Not only is material evidence associated with urban, politically developed society lacking but neither can we point to written evidence from which to glean an image of ‘Bedouin’ life.

Jāhiliyya, usually translated as ‘ignorance’ cannot logically describe this context of political, religious and military communications enveloping the desert. Nor can we deduce enough evidence from extant ‘Arabian’ materials to label this interior culture ‘ignorant’ and, if we take the cultural legacy of pre-Islamic poetry, tribal affiliation and popularly elected leadership it would be presumptuous to do so. What we can examine however, is why the post-prophetic, nascent Islamic world used *Jāhiliyya* to describe this murky milieu and what function the label served when we compare it to its literary antecedents. The sources, Hitti observed are “limited to traditions, legends, proverbs and above all to poems”⁶. It is, in fact, poetry which has survived as the lasting cultural testament to pre-Islamic, *Jāhiliyya* life and it is here that we find literary reference to the root word *Jahl* which allows us to view the poetic, ‘Arab’, tradition juxtaposed to the theological conceptions in the Qur’an and later scriptures.

⁵ Brown, J.A.C compares the social reality of pre-Islamic Arabia, as we find it in the poetry, with later desert nomad/Bedouin societies. (2003) ‘The Social Context of Pre-Islamic Poetry: Poetic Imagery and Social Reality in the Mu’allaqat’ Arab Studies Quarterly. Vol.25, no.3.

⁶ Hitti, P.K. (2002) History of the Arabs [revised 10th edition]. p.88. Basingstoke. Palgrave Macmillan.

Although the term *Jāhiliyya* became used predominantly in the early Islamic period as a chronological/spiritual division it is important to note linguistic antecedents in the oral literature of the pre-Islamic Bedouin. This is simply because the later Muslim writers, including Muhammed, chose to adopt *jahl* as the antithesis to Islam and, as such, used a term which was apparently in frequent use not only as a description but as a necessary ingredient of the well-rounded Bedouin morality expressed in the poetry. The word came, then, to connote not merely the zeal of the passionate warrior acting in defence of his guest, his tribe or his own honour, which we will see in the poetry, but a negative image of the whole socio-religious milieu before Muhammed received his revelation. The Qur'an itself uses the term on four occasions⁷ and all four specifically contrast the correct practice of Islam with pre-Islamic customs.

*Is it [Jāhiliyya] laws that they wish to be judged by? Who is a better judge than God for men whose faith is firm?*⁸

We are given a vivid glimpse of what this *Jāhiliyya* meant to the literate Muslim community when Ja'far explains his religion to the king of Abyssinia. He compares the state of affairs before the Prophet announced the word of God and we learn that

*"[they were] an uncivilized people, worshipping idols, eating corpses, committing abominations, breaking natural ties, treating guests badly, and [the] strong devoured [the] weak."*⁹

This attitude towards the pre-Islamic period continued in the *Hadith* literature where it also developed further the notion of *Jāhiliyya* as a period of time. Very often commentaries focus on action as it was 'in the *Jāhiliyya*' before describing the current attitude or Muhammed's attempts to mediate the wholesale change in moral structures. We are left in

⁷ Dawood, N.J (trans). (2004 edition)The Koran. [3:154, 5:50, 33:33, 48:26]. London. Penguin Classics. With help of the transliteration from the Arabic into the Roman alphabet on <http://www.searchtruth.com/> (accessed 06/01/14)

⁸ Ibid. 48:26.

⁹ Guillaume, A. (2004 edition) Ibn Ishaq's Life of Muhammed. [219]. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

little doubt, though, that however much the Prophet appeared sympathetic to these people in transition the behaviour of the preceding age was considered wholly abhorrent.

"Once, in the Jāhiliyya foretold somebody's future though I did not know this knowledge of foretelling but I, cheated him, and when he met me, he gave me something for that service, and that is what you have eaten from." Then Abu Bakr put his hand in his mouth and vomited whatever was present in his stomach.¹⁰

This is where ambiguity in the sources begins to emerge as, in the early period of Islam, those converts who began the expansion of both faith and empire, not least The Prophet himself, had been resident in this dark age of ignorance, violence and barbarism. It cannot be doubted, however, that in the Islamic scripture *Jāhiliyya* is conceived as being, first and foremost, the age predominantly in The Hijaz, where action was contrary to that proclaimed by Muhammed.

Yet there is a tension evident in these sources, which is due in large part to the same problems of historiography which scholars such as Crone point to. The majority of these writings, both the theological and the poetic were recorded and transmitted once the Muslim community had become both literate and urbanised in, for the most part, the Abbasid period. For Drory the poetry was collected and processed in this period "as part of an overall project of constructing "Arab" ethnic identity."¹¹ Not only was it subsequently venerated as the highest form of cultural achievement, it provided both a linguistic provenance for the Holy Scriptures and housed, for the urban Muslims, links to history of their civilization. It formed, with the Qur'an, twin pillars of Islamic culture and it is these textual traditions which have given linguistic provenance and historical characteristics to *Jāhiliyya*. However, this does not take into account that the context and content of this poetry glorifies that which is proscribed

¹⁰ Sahih Bukhari. Book 58, Hadith 182.

http://www.searchtruth.com/book_display.php?book=58&translator=1&start=0&number=182#182 (accessed 06/01/14)

¹¹ Drory, R. (1996) 'The Abbasid Construction of the Jāhiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making.' p.3. *Studia Islamica*. No.3.

in the scripture; it resonates with images which we are explicitly told in the Qur'an and elsewhere are pictures of sin, barbarism and violence.

The problems which Stetkevych believed affected the writings of the Abbasid court poets must have been present in the minds and motivations of the transmitters of the pre-Islamic corpus. These writers were pulled in two directions, "first [between] the tribal tradition of the *Jāhiliyya* age in which his cultural and ethical foundations were based and second the Islamic historical tradition which formed the basis of the Islamic religion and the Abbasid state."¹² This, however, is not quite right as we are explicitly told that Muhammed aimed at radically altering the morals of his audience; religion and morality are inextricably linked. If we are to understand the *Jahli* poetry, as Stetkevych does, as having a ritualistic form we can posit that it actually functioned as a quasi-religious ritual within the Islamic community. We can then, if we combine the theories of Freud and Durkheim, view this poetic-ritual as becoming an Islamic ritual which gave society both a cathartic mechanism relating to the pressures of a newly created and powerful state alongside a tool that gave largely disparate groups a shared provenance which spoke to their pre-prophetic cultural memory.

For Durkheim, religion emerged out of society's need to represent itself to itself. The god-head or totem is the *mana* of the community as they both search for bonds which go beyond kinship. This social-religion asks a lot of us however; "we are obliged to submit ourselves to rules of conduct and of thought which... are sometimes even contrary to our most fundamental inclinations and instincts."¹³ These inclinations, as Freud observed, will inevitably emerge in certain types of behaviour or practices and so we see the ritualization of

¹² Stetkevych, S.P. (1979) 'The Abbasid Interprets History: Three Qasidahs by Abu Tammam' p.1. Journal of Arabic Literature. Vol. 10.

¹³ Durkheim, E. (1915) The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. p.207. E-Book.

<https://archive.org/stream/elementaryformso1915durk#page/n0/mode/2up> (accessed 27/12/13).

form and content which legitimises ideas, images and contexts perceived as sinful by the Islamic scripture.

Religion, for Freud, resembled and in fact was a neurological illness with ritual as its most observable symptom. It did, however, serve a function in that it allowed for a cathartic release of certain temptations which, if openly yielded to, would result in punishment either real or imagined.¹⁴ These temptations should not, in this case, be necessarily associated, at this stage, with Freud's Oedipal theory but, rather, with a desire to become homogenous with the natural forces found both in the world and the depths of the individual's mind. For example we can see in the *Su'luk* genre that the poet is able to enter the wilds and become associated with animals while increasing/demonstrating his own virtue;

*I have folk [to keep me company] without you; swift wolf, sleek, spotted [panther]; and shaggy maned, loping [hyena].*¹⁵

Freud and Durkheim may seem diametrically opposed thinkers to draw upon¹⁶ however we can reconcile them when we consider the role that society plays in the religious life of both the individual and community and especially through social ritual as an ingredient for the growth of religious sentiment. As Burkert noted, "in studying the formation of private rituals, the sociological-functional approach provides a necessary complement to psychology."¹⁷ That is, society creates in the individual the idea of a sociological soul or *super-ego* which is an idealised moral and immutable form of that society:

¹⁴ Freud, S. (1907) 'Obsessional Actions and Religious Practices'. Freud, the Complete Works. E-Book via https://archive.org/details/Freud-CompleteWorks_365 (accessed 27/12/13). All subsequent references to Freud's articles are taken from this resource.

¹⁵ Al-Shanfara Lamiyyat al-Arab. [5] Taken from Jones, A. (2011) Early Arabic Poetry. Reading. Ithaca Press.

¹⁶ Durkheim has been accused of being anti-psychological, Freud of being guilty of the same crimes that he ascribes to religion.

Lukes, S. (1985) Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study. Stanford. Stanford University Press.

R.Stark & W.S. Bainbridge. (1996) A Theory of Religion. New Jersey, Rutgers University Press.

¹⁷ Burkert, W. (1983) Homo Necans. p.25. London. University of California Press.

“Although our moral conscience is a part of our consciousness, we do not feel ourselves of an equality with it. In this voice which makes itself heard only to give us orders and establish prohibitions, we cannot recognise our own voices... it expresses something within us that is not of ourselves. This is the objective foundation of the idea of the soul...”¹⁸

Freud’s theory of the *super-ego* largely agrees with this, with society at childhood substituted for family. Society here is to equated with those rules of conduct which Durkheim saw as repressing individual inclinations; it is institutionalised ‘religion’ which provides the framework for the *super-ego* in the theocracy of the Caliphate and it is the associated, overarching moral and social tenets which seek to dispel the individual’s libidinal instincts.

More specifically, Freud posited that religion itself emerged out of a primordial parricide and the subsequent feelings engendered in the murderers. That is, simultaneous guilt (resulting in deification of the father) and an ambiguous desire to re-enact the killing so as to affirm their own libidinal power; sacrifice. “Thus it became a duty to repeat the crime of parricide again and again in the sacrifice of the totem animal.”¹⁹ Freud goes on to assert that this need for catharsis reappears in “later products of religion, often in the strangest disguises and transformations.”²⁰ When we couple this with his the further theory of libido repressed by *super-ego* and the nature of subsequent ritual actions we can begin to understand why poetry survived as core element of the Islamic communal and individual psyche and why its *Jāhiliyya* values were simultaneously negated.

When the collections of pre-Islamic poetry began to become accessible to Western historians and philologists it seemed that an uncorrupted account of Bedouin society on the eve of Islam had been discovered. In 1914 Lyall observed that “by the help of the poems... we are able to construct, at least in general outline, a fairly complete account of the main

¹⁸ Durkheim, E. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. p.262.

¹⁹ Freud, S. (1912) *Totem and Taboo*. p.2785

²⁰ *Ibid* p.2786

events and the state of society in Arabia during that pregnant century which preceded the establishment of the Empire of Islam.”²¹ There are, of course, significant arguments concerning the authenticity of the ‘Bedouin’ poetic corpus. It was not recorded in writing until, for the most the part, the Abbasid period and this civilization, based in Baghdad, was both urban and lettered; it was, in MacDonald’s words “a society and culture which was utterly different from that of the desert Arabs who produced this poetry, and [their] mentality was as far removed from that of the pagan Arabs as is our own.”²² Furthermore, it has been argued that the poetry in question was, in fact, completely fabricated by Muhammed’s Quraysh tribe in order to lend linguistic and cultural providence to the language and message of the Qur’an.²³ Despite these attacks the poetry has, on the whole, been rescued for historical use but it must be recognised that the apparently fixed, conservative structure of the texts are a symptom of their Abbasid collection. We must consider them, therefore, as being necessarily linked to the theocratic state which transmitted them.

There are two preeminent forms of poetry which have come down to us, the *qit’a* and the *qasida*. While the *qit’a* had been shown to be the original structural model²⁴ the *qasida* rapidly came to overshadow it in importance and popularity and had a distinctive style and structure, with individual difference usually focussing on the exaltation of the poet himself or the patron and his ability to uniquely describe the stock scenes of the genre. In brief, these scenes as outlined by Ibn Qutayba and others are as follows; The composer often begins by describing the deserted habitation of his ancestors or long-departed tribesmen; He then weeps for a lost love (separation/*nasib*) before embarking or describing the trials and pain of a desert journey with his camel (liminality/*rahil*); Very often there is a glorification or praise of

²¹ Lyall, C.J. (1914) ‘Ancient Arabian Poetry as a Source of Historical Information.’ p.13. Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

²² McDonald, M.V. (1978) ‘Orally Transmitted Poetry in Pre-Islamic Arabia and Other Pre-Literate Societies.’ p.1. Journal of Arabic Literature. Vol.9.

²³ For instance, see Husain and Margoliouth CF: Monroe, J.T. (1972) ‘Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry’ p.1-4. Journal of Arabic Literature.

²⁴ McDonald, M.V. ‘Orally Transmitted Poetry’.

the patron, tribe or of the poet's own deeds (aggregation/*fakhr*). Stetkevych has already done much to move study of the pre-Islamic poetry towards a religious studies method and she has convincingly argued that this predominant structure in the extant literature can be read as having a ritual form. Specifically, we can view the *qasida* as representing the rites of passage framework developed by Van Gennep, namely separation, liminality and aggregation²⁵; or, a movement away from society into wildness and a period of strife, followed by a return to the fold.²⁶ Within this corpus, and especially in the *fakhr* sections we are very often faced with examples of morality which are seemingly at odds with *Jāhiliyya* as a label for barbarism. For example, diplomacy is made a prime virtue and goal when Zuhayr, in his *mu'allaqat* praises the tribal representatives who brokered the peace between Abs and Zubyán;

“An oath, that you are verily two excellent chiefs, who are found worthy of honour in every condition, between ease and distress.

The two endeavourers from the tribe of Ghaiz bin Murrah strove in making peace after the connection between the tribes had become broken, on account of the shedding of blood.

You repaired with peace the condition of the tribes of 'Abs and Zubyán, after they had fought with one another, and ground up the perfume of Manshim between them.”²⁷

Not all *Jahili* poetry follows this format and an interesting study is the *Su'luk* genre which can be seen as the prime example of *Jāhiliyya* life as we find it in the Islamic sources and seemingly opposed to the social *fakhr* found in Zuhayr and elsewhere.. Yet the style of these poets can be read as ritualistic and, further, exemplary of the fundamental ambiguity towards the *Jāhiliyya* as a historical and moral label.

While often disregarded as legendary in a historical sense, some of our best accounts of idealistic Bedouin life come from the *Su'luk* poetry which was composed by outlaws,

²⁵ Van Gennep, A. (1960 edition) *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago. Chicago University Press.

²⁶ This can be interpreted in many ways throughout world religions i.e. symbolic deaths, sacrifices and redemption. Stetkevych, S.P. (2010) *The Mute Immortals Speak*. p.6-8. New York. Cornell University Press.

²⁷ Zuhayr. *Mu'allaqat*. Lines 14-16. Trans Johnson, F.E. <http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/HIST351-1.1.1-The-Hanged-Poems.pdf> (accessed 05/01/14)

vagabonds or wanderers who were removed from the wider tribe and left to their own literary philosophising.

Al-Shanfara's *Lamiyyat al-Arab*, which is an early poem largely accepted (by Lyall, Jones and others) as genuine, depicts the poet leaving his tribe and going out in search of both adventure and freedom out in the desert. We have already seen that he associates with animals while he puts his faith in his bravery or "dauntless heart", his "bright sharp" sword and his "long necked bow".²⁸ We would expect, perhaps, that social morality would wane in the light of this wild existence yet he maintains his virtue even when hungry and alone.

*If hands are stretched out for food, [mine are] not the swiftest of them, for the greediest of the tribe are the swiftest.*²⁹

...

And [I am] not [one who] is impatient through neediness, nor one who makes a show of his poverty, nor am I boastful, putting on airs under [the influence of] wealth.

*No acts of folly sweep away my self-control (hilm), nor am I seen to be an eager questioner, nor one who retails ill-natured gossip as the result of idle chatter.*³⁰

Despite the general lack of the usual *fakhr* or aggregation section, we can use the *Su'luk* poetry, as Stetkevych does³¹, to observe incomplete ritual. The narrator/poet has departed the society and embraced his libidinal desires through his cohabitation with animals and propensity for violence yet he has not returned to the fold and renounced the excesses of his *Jahl*. However, if we view the poetic corpus itself, in its preservation and transmission as necessarily ritualistic in its cathartic benefits the problem of *fakhr* in the *Su'luk* can be solved

²⁸ al-Shanfara. *Lamiyyat al-Arab* Line 11

²⁹ Ibid. Line 8.

³⁰ Ibid. Lines 52-53.

³¹ Stetkevych, S.P. (1986) 'Archetype and Attribution in Early Arabic Poetry: al-Shanfara and the *Lamiyyat al-Arab*.' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

by the audiences own reintegration into the religious community when the poem is completed in its recitation.

Importantly, in the above lines of al-Shanfara, the term *hilm* or 'self-control' is extolled as a virtue of prime importance to the desert dweller and it is this which, in pre-Islamic literature which is usually set in opposition to the root word of *Jāhiliyya*, that is, *jahl*. In this context *jahl* should be considered 'wildness', 'impetuosity' or 'zeal' seen against the serenity of *hilm*. It is with the tempering of these two poles, or their application in the correct context, that real virtue can be seen in the same manner as the Greek concept of 'nothing to excess.' This is the interpretation given by Goldziher who cites these lines as the embodiment of tribal *hilm* and *jahl*;

The wild man amongst us is ferocious (jahil) in the defence of his guest;

The ferocious man is mild (halim) when insulted by him [the guest].³²

Hilm is a virtue honoured by Islam yet its necessary counterpart *jahl* is abhorred. In fact, the whole poetic corpus idealises an existence which is railed against by both the Prophet and the later scripture. This is evidence for the ambiguity that Freud observes is prevalent in all forms of ritual which are, at a primal level, associated with sacrifice. This is of course controversial but, used as a heuristic in line with Durkheim's sociology we can see that the ritualization of pre-Islamic poetry and the need to maintain its pre-eminence, alongside the moral revolution of Islam, fulfilled the same cathartic mechanism as the Freudian sacrifice, i.e. the taboo was subconsciously longed for in spite of the social proscriptions/*super-ego* so a legitimising, substitute, ritual was developed.

³² CF: Goldziher, I. (2009) Muslim Studies vol. 1. p.205. note.6. New Jersey. Transaction Publishers.

The court poets in Abbasid Baghdad were able to draw on this poetic material and cement its form in a way that allowed it to serve as a ritual which did not threaten the spiritual validity of the scriptures. Drory noted that in this period a conflict emerged between poets who sought to uphold the oral tradition in which this poetry was malleable with undetermined ideas and scholars such as al-Muffadal who transmitted fixed 'originals.' It is suggested that the victory of al-Muffadal's method came out of an institutionalised programme of inventing an 'Arab' ethnicity and, to a large degree, this seems acceptable. Yet it seems, when we interpret this scholarly activity as ritualization that the theological dichotomy between Islam itself and the poetic *Jāhiliyya* construction solved a psychological (both for the individual and community) problem.

What emerges, then, is a picture of a community attempting to either construct or remember an idealised past which they had significant cultural and emotional ties, despite the theological and social prohibitions on its values and morals. This, I would argue, manifests and attempts to resolve itself through the endeavour made, primarily within the urban literary culture, to engage with *Jāhiliyya* as a cathartic mechanism. The poetry in this period became increasingly fixed in structure and as Stetkevych saw, ritualistic. It can therefore be seen in Freudian terms as excising the libidinal instincts of the Islamic society to which it spoke. *Jāhiliyya*, then, can be seen as gradually shifting from its role as a non-value based component of virtue to a description of the pre-Islamic milieu and, finally, through our understanding of the ritualization of poetry, to reflecting the Freudian *id* of the Abbasid community.

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