# 3.1 Purification Through Word and Deed: Phonological Repetition and Analogical Thinking in Two *Maqlû* Incantations

## Version 01

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Abstract: Two incantations at the beginning of the Babylonian anti-witchcraft series *Maqlû* reveal, upon textual analysis, a thick web of associations on the phonological level with the magical objective of this part of the ritual, i.e., the purification of the patient. In this showcase, I will discuss these associations and their implications for our understanding of Ancient Mesopotamian magic.

# 1. Introduction

The study of Ancient Mesopotamian magical rituals within the framework of REPAC draws on historical and anthropological comparanda, in particular the work of anthropologist S.J. Tambiah, who demonstrated that magical rituals are distinguished by a 'reciprocity of word and deed' (Tambiah 1985: 18). As we extend this hypothesis to Ancient Mesopotamian magical rituals we can show that there, too, by combining verbal and physical acts in a ritual context, their symbolic meaning is translated into a real-world effect via analogical thinking. Purification rites, for example, frequently make use of water – cross-cultural examples are numerous (see, e.g., Bradley 2012). The substance commonly used for washing in day-to-day life receives through its use in a ritual context the power to transform its cleansing properties into a more fundamental purification, such as the purification of patients from their ailments. This insight is highly relevant regarding Ancient Mesopotamian ritual texts:

> Although we are willing to admit this as a 'symbolic' analogy based on the practice of washing in water, we are reluctant to regard the ritual as "real" in the same sense as the physical cleaning process of taking a shower. And this is precisely where we take issue with the Assyrians. To them the 'ritual' performance was as real and effective as the morning ritual is to us (Ankarloo and Clark 2001: xiii).

An instance of a magical purification making use of water is found in the Babylonian anti-witchcraft series *Maqlû* 'burning' (see Schwemer 2010). *Maqlû* is a ritual involving the burning of figurines, manipulation of various other substances (*materia magica*), and the utterance of incantations, performed for patients afflicted by the curse of an evil witch or warlock (Abusch 2002, 2016). As a series, *Maqlû* consists of eight Tablets (I-XIII) containing altogether almost one hundred incantations, and a ninth Tablet, the Ritual Tablet (RT), containing instructions for ritual actions to be performed alongside the recitation of the incantations.

Since we have the textual sources for both the incantations and the accompanying physical actions, we can investigate the hypothesized reciprocity between the verbal and physical parts of the ritual. For this showcase, we examine two successive incantations in *Maqlû*, hereafter Inc. A (*Maqlû* I 37-41) and Inc. B (*Maqlû* I 42-49), that are assigned the ritual instruction *mê tattanaddi* 'You sprinkle water' (RT 19′-20′).

I will demonstrate that these texts reveal, upon textual analysis, a thick web of associations on the phonological level with the magical objective of this part of the ritual, i.e., the purification of the patient by the gods. To do so, our study is sub-divided in two parts. First, we provide the studied texts in the Akkadian transcription and the English translation. Then, I will focus on phonological repetition, in particular the conspicuous prevalence of repeated phonological elements shared, in the case of Inc. A, by the Akkadian word for 'water', *mû*, and, in the case of Inc. B, by the Akkadian word for 'to purify', *ullulu*. This study is based on REPAC's main hypothesis that repetition and parallelism in magical texts contribute decidedly to their meaning construction and effectiveness.

# 2. Transcription and translation

Below, Inc. A and Inc. B are given in reconstructed transcription and translation, followed by the two corresponding entries in the Ritual Tablet. The most recent edition of *Maqlû* is offered by Abusch (2016, for Incs. A and B see pp. 32-34, 231-232, 286-287, for the entries on the Ritual Tablet pp. 208, 273, 368). Another translation of the two incantations at hand is provided

by Schwemer (2010: 319, 322-323). We also have a German translation by Abusch and Schwemer (2008: 137).

My rendition below is based on Abusch's transcription and these three translations. The philological details will be discussed in my forthcoming doctoral thesis on repetition and parallelism in *Maqlû*.

| *Maqlû* I | **Inc. A** | |
|---|---|---|
| 37. | **1.** ÉN *erṣetu erṣetu erṣetumma* | Incantation: Netherworld, Netherworld, oh Netherworld! |
| 38. | **2.** *Gilgameš bēl māmītīkunu* | Gilgameš is the master of your curse! |
| 39. | **3.** *mimmû attunu tēpušā anāku īde* | All that you have done, I know, |
| 40. | **4.** *mimmû anāku eppušu attunu ul tīdâ* | All that I will do, you do not know. |
| 41. | **5.** *mimmû kaššāpātūʾa ippušā ēgâ pāṭira pāšira ul irašši* TU₆ ÉN | All that my witches do, there will be nobody who disregards, releases (or) undoes (it). – Incantation formula. |

| *Maqlû* I | **Inc. B** | |
|---|---|---|
| 42. | **1.** ÉN *ālī Zabban ālī Zabban* | Incantation: My city Zabban! My city Zabban! |
| 43. | **2.** *ša āliya Zabban šittā abullātūšu* | Of my city Zabban, two are its gates. |
| 44. | **3.** *ištēt ana utuʾe šanītu ana utušuʾa* | One to the east, the second to the west. |
| 45. | **4.** *ištēt ana ṣīt Šamši šanītu ana ereb Šamši* | One towards the sunrise, the second towards the sunset. |
| 46. | **5.** *anāku ēra ḫaṣba maštakal našâku* | I am raising a broken-off *ēru*-stick (and) a *maštakal*-plant, |
| 47. | **6.** *ana ilī ša šamê mê anamdin* | I offer water to the gods of the sky (and say): |
| 48. | **7.** *kīma anāku ana kâšunu ullalukunūši* | As I purify you for your sake, |
| 49. | **8.** *attunu yâši ullilāʾinni* TU₆ ÉN | May you purify me myself! – Incantation formula. |

**Ritual instructions**

*Maqlû* Ritual Tablet

| 19'. | [ÉN *erṣetu erṣetu er*]ṣetumma mê tatta[nad]d[i] | [Incantation: 'Netherworld, netherworld], oh [ne]therworld': You spri[nkle] water. |
|---|---|---|
| 20'. | ÉN *alī* [*Za*]*b*[*b*]*an a*[*l*]*ī Zabban* K[I.MIN] (= *mê tattanaddi*) | Incantation: 'My city [Za]b[b]an! My c[it]y Zabban': d[itto] (= You sprinkle water). |

Table 1: *Maqlû* I 37-41 (Inc. A), *Maqlû* I 42-49 (Inc. B), *Maqlû* Ritual Tablet 19'-20'

# 3. Phonological repetition

All *Maqlû* incantations are – to varying degrees – characterised by the repetition of sound patterns. Speech sounds are important in incantations which are, at least theoretically, intended for vocal recitation. We argue that, in these texts, phonological repetition has a function that goes beyond the realm of poetic and rhetorical aesthetics: to the texts' composers, phonological repetition, especially in its 'associative capacity' (see below 3.1 and 3.2), was a meaningful device to linguistically enhance the magical efficacy of an incantation. In other words, what presents itself as a *literary* device to the modern reader had, emically, an extra-linguistic ('real world') and performative relevance (see De Zorzi 2022; Noegel 2014).

## 3.1. Water

In Inc. A and Inc. B, water is especially relevant because it is involved in the physical action accompanying the ritual (RT 19′-20′) and it is mentioned also in Inc. B, *mê anamdin* 'I offer water' (Inc. B, 6). This phrase, in turn, is linked to the ritual instruction *mê tattanaddi* 'you sprinkle water' (RT 19′-20′) through the two phonologically similar verbs, i.e., *nadānu* 'to give' (*anamdin* is the first-person singular G-stem) and *nadû* 'to throw' (*tattanaddi* is the second-person singular Gtn-stem).

Most strikingly in Inc. A, verses 3-4 display anaphora: they all begin with the word *mimmû* 'everything, something, anything'. The exact repetition of *mimmû* in such a prominent position at the beginning of verses indicates a strong emphasis on the word. Importantly for our argument, *mimmû* has a close phonological affinity to *mû* 'water'. The connection is created through the repetition of the consonant /m/ in general and the repetition of the syllable /mû/ in particular.

In addition to the *mimmû-mû* connection, the lemma *māmītīkunu* 'your curse' (Inc. A, 2) contains the syllables /mā/ and /mī/ (the latter agreeing with the /i/-vowel of /mim/ in *mimmû*), and the lemma *erṣetumma* 'O netherworld' (Inc. A, 1) contains the syllables /um/ and /ma/. The appearance of these words further strengthens the impression of the purposeful use of words phonologically similar to *mû* 'water' in Inc. A. The lemmata *erṣetumma* and *māmītīkunu* connect by both combining the /Vm/ and /mV/ phonemes with /t/, establishing a further variant phonological parallelism between verses 1 and 2.

In the following simplified representations of the discussed phonemes, long vowels (V̄) and contracted vowels (V̂) are also represented by a simple 'V':

| *Maqlû* I | **Inc. A** | **Phonological repetition** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 37. | **1.** ÉN *erṣetu erṣetu erṣetumma* | /ṭumma/ | /tVmmV/ |
| 38. | **2.** *Gilgameš bēl māmītīkunu* | /māmītī/ | /mVmVtV/ |
| 39. | **3.** *mimmû attunu tēpušā anāku īde* | /mimmû/ | /mVmmV/ |
| 40. | **4.** *mimmû anāku eppušu attunu ul tīdâ* | /mimmû/ | /mVmmV/ |
| 41. | **5.** *mimmû kaššāpātūʾa ippušā ēgâ pāṭira pāšira ul iraššiši* TU₆ ÉN | /mimmû/ | /mVmmV/ |

Table 2: Phonological repetition of /m/ in Inc. A

Water is also named in Inc. B: *ana ilī ša šamê mê anamdin* 'I offer water to the gods of the sky' (Inc. B, 6). The phrase *ša šamê mê*, literally 'of the sky – water' not only brings out the phonological repetition of the syllables /ša/ and /mê/ but also relates the semantically contiguous and partially homonymous *šamû* and *mû* to each other.

## 3.2. Purification

The text of Inc. B names both *mû* 'water' (see Inc. B, 6) and *ullulu* 'to purify' (see Inc. B, 7-8) as a lexical manifestation of the two words at the core of the meaning-construction of both Inc. A and B. Furthermore, Inc. B creates sound-based associations with the lexeme *ullulu* 'to purify' (the D-stem of *elēlu* 'to be pure') and thus with the concept of purification. The repetition of the lemmata *ālī* and *āliya* (Inc. B 42-43) contains the syllables /ālī/ and /āli/, the lexeme *abullātūšu* (verse 2) contains the syllable /ullā/, and the lexeme *ilī* (verse 6) has the similar phonological profile /ilī/. All of these words have a phonological affinity to *ullulu*, which appears in the morphological forms *ullalukunūši* 'I purify you' (durative, verse 7) and *ullilāʾinni* 'may you purify me' (imperative, verse 8).

The lemmata *ereb* and *ēra* can be counted as a variant phonological repetition of the pattern /VlV/ when considering the phonological properties of /r/, which is, like /l/, a liquid. The phonemes /ere/ and /ēra/ share with /ālī/, /āli/, or /ilī/ the phonological profile VC{+liquid}V.

| *Maqlû* I | Inc. B | Phonological repetition | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 42. | **1.** ÉN *ālī* Zabban *ālī* Zabban | /ālī/, /ālī/ | /VlV/, /VlV/ |
| 43. | **2.** *ša āliya Zabban šittā abullātūšu* | /āli/, /ullā/ | /VlV/, /VllV/ |
| 44. | **3.** *ištēt ana utuʾe šanītu ana utušuʾa* | | |
| 45. | **4.** *ištēt ana ṣīt Šamši šanītu ana ereb Šamši* | /ere/ | /VrV/ |
| 46. | **5.** *anāku ēra ḫaṣba maštakal našâku* | /ēra/ | /VrV/ |
| 47. | **6.** *ana ilī ša šamê mê anamdin* | /ilī/ | /VlV/ |
| 48. | **7.** *kīma anāku ana kâšunu ullalukunūši* | /ullalu/ | /VllVlV/ |
| 49. | **8.** *attunu yâši ullilāʾinni* TU₆ ÉN | /ullilā/ | /VllVlV/ |

Table 3: Phonological repetition of liquids in Inc. B

The frequent repetition of the phonological elements shared by *ullulu* 'to purify' is intended to enhance the efficacy of the magical intervention aimed at purifying the bewitched patient. Phonological associations construct meaning that exceeds the semantic range deriving from the basic lexical content of a certain word. For example, in this incantation, the word *ālī*, which has the meaning 'my city', receives an additional meaning by phonological similarity with *ullulu* 'to purify'. Words other than *ullulu* add to the goal of purification by linguistic expression grounded in analogical thinking.

# 4. Conclusion

Purification was one of the most essential purposes of rituals in ancient Mesopotamia (see Pappi 2016). Several well-known rituals are dedicated specifically to purification (for example, *Bīt rimki*, see Schwemer 2019), and defensive magic directed against witchcraft also relies on purifying rituals (see Schwemer 2009).

The analysis of the two *Maqlû* incantations demonstrates that repetition, similarity and analogy are meaning-constructing devices in these texts. From an etic point of view, the examples of phonological repetition that we described play a structuring role by endowing the text with poetic unity. Emically, we argue, phonological repetition is fundamental to establishing the magical persuasiveness of the text.

In addition, a direct semantic link exists between the linguistic expression and the desired magical effect. Not only does the literal mention of *mû* 'water' (Inc. B, 6) and *ullulu* 'purify' (Inc. B, 7-8) bring about the intended ritual purification of the patient, but the utterance of similar-sounding words that have no semantic association with purity, such as *māmītu* 'curse' or *abullatu* 'gate', also contributes to the force of the incantations.

Our study of two exemplary incantations has revealed a correspondence between the recited words and the accompanying ritual act, the sprinkling of water. The symbolic substance water serves here as a *materia magica* and an analogy for purification. This reciprocity between words and deeds grounded in analogical thinking is, as Tambiah (1985, 2017 [1973]) has argued, the basis for a magically effective ritual. In etic terms, Mesopotamian thought here reflects, in a culture-specific way, a type of ontology called 'analogism' (Descola 2013). In the context of analogism, similarity – such as the similarity of sound between the Akkadian word for 'gate', *abullu*, and the Akkadian word for 'purify', *ullulu* – is 'a meaningful base for analogical reasoning and the construction of persuasive analogies' (De Zorzi 2022: 378).

We can conclude from this analysis that phonological repetition in the texts of the incantations creates analogical connections with water and purification, which were deemed effective in bringing about ritual purification of the patient. Thus, through analogical thinking and phonological repetition, we can see that the combination of word and deed is an important part of the Babylonian anti-witchcraft ritual *Maqlû*. We can gain a better understanding of the power of linguistic force in rituals, as well as the importance of analogical thinking and phonological repetition in Babylonian incantations, by understanding this connection between the words and the physical ritual.

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