

ESSAY ON THE ORIGINAL SYMBOLISM OF PAN PIPES

Although difficult to analyse, an object's original symbolism is often rooted in collective unconsciousness. As long as it exists, this object continues to feed the tissue of society, and to enlarge communication beyond the frontiers of mind and memory. Through its universality it creates a bridge between all human beings, whatever their age, sex or race.

Original symbolism is closely linked to the form of the archetypal object, and to the nature of the materials from which it is made. It also reflects the social relationships that existed when it was created. One should add that it is simple by definition¹, and that it could not otherwise represent an original reality.

In this essay, we will only look at two symbolic characteristics linked to the archetype. The first relates to its shape. This is specific to the Pan pipes, and is covered in the first chapter. The second concerns the material used : this is common to all reed or bamboo flutes, and is dealt with in the second chapter. In the third chapter we try to demonstrate that the original symbolic characteristics should be present, even if in debased form, throughout the life of the instrument.

1. ORIGINS OF THE PAN PIPES

When E. Morin states "... it is likely that, though their origins are far older, song, music and dancing were only fully developed by *sapiens*"², he is fully aware of recent discoveries in our knowledge of our early ancestors. Similarly, Y. Coppens, the discoverer of Lucy, has recently called for a revision of our ideas on dating. He also declared that he no longer doubts that Neanderthal man knew music³.

For the origins of music, we must therefore go back to *homo erectus*, who we should remember was also *socius*, *faber* and *loquens*. I suggest that he used a single pipe, from which the Pan pipes developed through the binding together of several tubes. This simple whistle only made one note, but this was loud enough to be heard at a distance⁴. It was no doubt in very early use as a means of communication, particularly in the hunt which was central to the activities of *homo erectus*. Each hunter had his whistle which linked him to the rest, while distinguishing him from them.

The emergence of *homo sapiens* was accompanied by senseless murder and inter clan massacres, probably arising out of demographic pressure, but above all as noted by E. Morin "... sapiens was more inclined to excess than his predecessors, and his reign was accompanied by an explosion of delusions, eroticism, affectivity and violence"⁵. He also states that : "The reign of sapiens saw a massive growth of disorder in the world"⁶. Faced with these troubles, ritual practices were developed to reinforce the necessary cohesion of the group. An example was the chain dance, where each dancer is linked to his neighbours.

Symbols also developed⁷. It would seem that there was an identification of man with his pipe. From there on, all the conditions were met for the development of the single pipe into Pan pipes. This transformation was very gradual, and went through an intermediary stage well illustrated by a vital archeological discovery. This was a linked set of reindeer bone whistles⁸, rather like an elongated rosary, which could be played by several performers, who could dance without losing contact with each other⁹.

This stage, which first linked the pipes and then bound them together, represented a development of relationships between individuals. It went with the emergence of a far more complex conscious collective life.

Very gradually the whistle became the Pan pipes, and the player symbolically held the whole group in his hands.

Many centuries passed before Pan pipes achieved this position. One of their two fundamental symbolic functions, which would cover several millenia, was then, to bind together the members of a community¹⁰.

2. NATURALLY HOLLOW MATERIALS

2.1. Reeds, bamboos

The original pipe could be made without any tools¹¹. This fact, which also leads us to believe in the great antiquity of Pan pipes, can also be seen in another light.

Today we are surrounded by innumerable hollow objects, to which we pay no particular attention. It was not always so, as they are rare in nature, and this made them particularly worthy of attention.

The grotto, the maternal womb, suggest the idea of shelter, of protection. Reeds, secretly hollow and decidedly phallic, have both feminine and virile characteristics. They take us back to the mysterious notion of procreation, and symbolise fertility, sexuality¹². "In Shinto mythology the reed shoot emerging from the primeval waters represents, the equivalent of the lotus"¹³. And what do we learn about the lotus : "the lotus flower is thus above all the sexual organ, the archetypal vulva, guarantee of the continuation of births and rebirths"¹⁴. Such quotations are legion.

This symbolic character of reeds, linked to the basic nature of the material, is fundamental. Naturally it is shared by all reed flutes.

2.2. Hollow bird bones¹⁵

As they are much more difficult to use than reeds, bones certainly came on the scene later¹⁶, but I do not believe that they should be seen as a substitution material, even if this theorie cannot be totally discarded. The bone flute did not survive, and all contemporary Pan pipes are developments of the reed polycalame flute, including Pan pipes made in one piece¹⁷, which are only a later evolution of the former¹⁸.

It should be remembered that projection into a virtual world by means of trances, was widely practised by all primitive peoples. Pan pipes and other whistles are useful means of bringing the user to a state of hyperventilation, which can be a first step towards a modification of consciousness.

With bone pipes, the nature of the material, of animal origin, suggests particular magical practices, designed to acquire the specific quality or power of the animal concerned¹⁹. Bone pipes are thus rather the tool for a symbolic transfer, than a strictly symbolic form.

The original symbolic characteristics of polycalame reed flutes as discussed earlier are not relevant here.

If the reed flute was, and still is, traditionally used throughout the world to produce a state of trance, this is a collective ritual with collective effect, involving the whole group. On the other hand, the bone flute was used in a ceremony which can be defined as private, even if the group as a whole was involved in it.

3. READINGS

3.1. Pan et Syrinx

A rapid rereading of the association between Pan and the Syrinx, shows that the myth was created by exploiting the original symbolic potential. We can clearly see the relevance of this indivisible pair at the service of the prosperity of shepherds.

In the VIIth century BC, a Homeric hymn, quoting a more ancient legend, gives Hermes as the inventor of the Pan pipes²⁰.

A second, more recent, myth gives Pan as the inventor of his flute ; in Arcadia, a small Greek pastoral province in the centre of the Peloponese, Pan presides over the fertility of the flocks. But Pan is terrifying and obscene, and his love making is brutal. His appearance creates

panic. He is in love with the nymph Syrinx, but she prefers to throw herself into the river Ladon rather than yield to his advances. At the place where she disappeared, reeds rustle in the wind. The unhappy Pan gathers some of these and consoles himself with the flute he makes, and names it Syrinx²¹.

The grace of Syrinx is now in his hands, and his breath brings her back to life. How can we interpret Pindar's "Pan distills his own honey" if Pan had not been transended by Syrinx. By the Vth century BC Syrinx is definitely an attribute of the god Pan, whose fame now reaches far beyond the borders of Arcadia.

The original symbolic virtues of Pan pipes are clearly expressed in this myth. If all flutes can encourage mating, only the polycalame type have the power so necessary to Pan, of bringing the group together. Syrinx, by overcoming panic, and being stronger than it, is complementary to the function of Pan.

Nymphs were also associated with birth : another guarantee of the fertility of the flocks.

Later Plato writes : "you have the lyre and the zither, useful in towns, but in the fields the shepherds will have the Syrinx"²². We can see that the nymph is powerful in her domain, but that her charm fails in the city. Plato made no mistake, and the Pan pipes were firmly linked to the pastoral scene. But we should also understand that the symbolic content is less powerful as soon as the flute leaves its original setting.

3.2. Other readings

Pan pipes are also depicted in the hands of sirens. However this does not mean that we are leaving Pan, as sirens symbolise the strong temptations of earthly pleasures, and above all of sex. Here again Pan pipes are the expression of charm, which facilitates the coming together and union of the sexes.

Much later we see Pan pipes in religious services, the clergy having classified them as acceptable in church. Is this an endorsement of their musical or symbolic qualities ? Whatever the answer, it should be noted that the Pan pipes seen among the selected instruments are usually monoxyle, sometimes with windows as in the 12th century St Remy Abbey psalter. Maybe the clergy was aware of their symbolic qualities, but could not accept the polycalame version as being too suggestive. The clergy read Greek, and had perhaps not forgotten that this flute personified a nymph made eternal by a pagan god.

4. CONCLUSION

The sexual connotations of the reed and the binding of the pipes, together with the social context, determined the two original symbolic characteristics. These three elements, form, material and social context, have developed in traditional societies so as to blur and complicate the original symbolism. Furthermore, modern Western societies have seen a proliferation of signs used only by small groups. Even if they do not wipe out the original symbolism. They tend to hide it.

We can also see that if at least one of the symbolic characteristics corresponds to the needs of a particular community, both the symbolism and the instrument are preserved. On the other hand, symbolic obsolescence generally leads to the abandonment of the instrument. In France for example this is the case for the "freteu" in Provence and the "fioulet" in the Pyrenees, which are disappearing with the end of pastoralism.

An instrument seems to survive only if it supplies a need, not in terms of musical quality but of symbolic merit. This must put its expansion or even survival in question, in Western societies which have abandoned pastoralism, and are no longer interested in fertility. Might it be that in our troubled twentieth century, it is the unconscious collective expression of a need for rebinding ?

Gilles PATRAT

Cet essai a été publié par la «ROMANIAN SOCIETY FOR ETHNOMUSICOLOGIE» (Bucarest, Roumanie), en 1999, dans le N°6 de son bulletin international «EAST EUROPEAN MEETINGS IN ETHNOMUSICOLOGIE» fondé et dirigé par M. Marin Marian-Balasa.

Les citations sont autorisées dans les limites prévues par la loi.

Pour une reproduction plus importante, demandez l'autorisation à l'auteur.

Gilles Patrat

11 A, Les Castors

13850 Gréasque

France

Tél. 04 42 69 81 74

NOTES

- ¹ - “ ... a symbolism which remains sensitive to the innate value of fundamental symbols, tends to bring everything back to a few ever-simple key images, which are as inexhaustable as the mysteries of life which they express. ” CHAMPEAUX G. et dom STERCKX S. o.s.b., *Le monde des symboles*, France, Zodiaque, 1989, p 265.
- ² - MORIN E., *Le paradigme perdu : la nature humaine*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, p 117.
- ³ - In the radio programme "Archipel Sciences" in october 1996 on France Culture.
- ⁴ - “ ... if drumming on a pair of parchment drums is so widespread, it is because this can express an earlier whistled communication. ” LABOURET H., *Langage tambouriné et sifflé*, in Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'A. O. F., Janvier-Mars 1923, p 154.
- ⁵ - MORIN E., op. cit., p 122.
- ⁶ - MORIN E., ibid., p 122.
- ⁷ - “ The essence of ritual magic, for homo sapiens, is not only to directly address beings from which an answer is expected, but also images and symbols which are assumed in some way to contain the being concerned. ” MORIN E., ibid., p 113.
- ⁸ - “ These bones linked together with thongs, made real Pan pipes... ” GIROD P. et MASSENAT E., *Les stations de l'âge du renne dans les vallées de la Vézère et de la Corrèze*, Laugerie et Basse, p 79.
- ⁹ - “ ... they suggest to us that before the syrinx took the form of a block or bundle, the pipes were perhaps only loosely joined together. ” SCHAEFFNER A., *Origine des instruments de musique*, 1968, Paris, Mouton Éditeur, 1980, p 280.
 - “ ... the most subtle link imaginable is a chain of dancers : dance of flute players, each with a flute or whistle producing a single sound ; this group of individual instruments giving a succession of notes comparable to the range of Pan pipes. ” SCHAEFFNER A., ibid., p 280.
 - “ ... this human syrinx whose pipes were distributed among the dancers. ” SCHAEFFNER A., ibid., p 282.
- ¹⁰ - “ On the way to the festival, the musician guests carried out a ritual, so that the sound of their Pan pipes had the power to attract a lot of people... ” Zemp H., Etude sur les Are-Are, quoted by KERSALE P. In the article "Flûtes de Pan mythiques et sacrées", in *ETHNYS* n° 1, Paris, 1992.
- ¹¹ - Easily for the different types of reed, which are relatively soft, but less so for bamboo.
- ¹² - “ The duality of bamboo (...) is a symbol of attachement, of conjugal union. ” CHEVALIER J. et GHEERBRANT A., *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 1969, Paris, Robert Laffont/Jupiter Éditeurs, 1994, p 104.
 - “ For the ancient Mexicans, it (the reed) was a symbol of fertility, abundance, and prosperity. ” CHEVALIER J. et GHEERBRANT A., op. Cit., p 825.
 - “ Men play the flute in puberty rites. ” RIVIN R., Article "Flûtes de Pan des indiens Kunas du Panama", in *Flûtes de Pan* n° 12, Paris, 1989, p 10.
 - “ Today the Gamma Burui, Pan pipes, are "macho" (male) and "hembra" (female). ” RIVIN R., op. Cit., p 11.
- ¹³ - CHEVALIER J. et GHEERBRANT A., ibid., p 824.
- ¹⁴ - CHEVALIER J. et GHEERBRANT A., ibid., p 581.
- ¹⁵ - “ The oldest Pan pipes found in Europe come from the eastern part of the continent : a neolithic necropolis (2000 BC) in southern Ukraine and a site in the region of Saratov. Each was made of seven or eight hollow bird bones... ” BUCHNER A., *Encyclopédie des instruments de musique*, Paris, Gründ, 1980, p 20.
- ¹⁶ - “ There seems no doubt that the Syrinx began as a bundle of different sized reed pipes. ” SCHAEFFNER A., ibid., p 282.
- ¹⁷ - Pan pipes made by boring holes in a piece of wood : "monoxyl", or stone : "monolyth", as well as ceramic pipes. All can be referred to as "monobloc".
- ¹⁸ - “ It is however rare to find Pan pipes in stone or clay which do not bear the traces of a succession of pipes, and remind one of their existence. ” SCHAEFFNER A., ibid., p 282.
 - On this subject, see the article by KERSALE P. : "Antaras de pierre des Incas et de leurs prédécesseurs", in *ETHNYS* n° 7, Paris, 1994.
- ¹⁹ - “ ... They used the bones of the animal they hunted in the sense that, having eaten its flesh, and played its bones, they appropriated its qualities and symbolic values. ” BARBE J.,

article "Approche des flûtes andines, de la tradition au XX^{ème} siècle", in *Flûtes du Monde*, numéro spécial 1988, Belfort, p 48.

²⁰ - This first birth, in the hands of Hermes, has not been retained. This version was perhaps not totally pertinent or functional.

²¹ - This myth is told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, book one. It is the myth which has endured across the centuries.

²² - PLATON, *Républiques* III.