

Divination and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: A Problem of Perspective?

Part I

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to examine and compare two analogous clusters of behaviour: on the one hand, what is called in the West 'Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder' (OCD), and on the other hand divination (omens and protective rituals) as practised in the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia (Babylonia and Assyria). The former is considered abnormal behaviour in modern Western culture whilst the latter was considered quite normal for nearly three millennia in ancient Mesopotamia. By analogous are meant here behaviours which appear as similar in terms of attributes, circumstances and relationships, but which might or might not be homologous or functionally equivalent. It is hoped that this work will shed new light on the role of culture in the promulgation and transmission of behaviour, as well as the semantics of behaviour patterns.

It is in the nature of interdisciplinary research, that what for one discipline is common knowledge, is new or different for the other discipline; thus stating what is obvious for people in one discipline is necessary for the enlightenment of the other. Such is the case with this work as I am joining the disciplines of ancient Near Eastern study and that of modern psychiatry.

Excursus: Imagine a world in which, when you went to your general practitioner (GP) for some malady, you were sternly instructed that on the way home you were to avoid retracing your steps. Any contact with your earlier footprints would re-contaminate you with the illness for which you had just been treated. Also imagine that your GP had not only treated you but had prescribed certain rituals that you were to perform without fail in order to ward off future infection. Now picture yourself walking home from your GP's surgery along a sandy path; because you can see your earlier footprints you assiduously avoid treading on them. How might this be viewed by an onlooker?

Now let us suppose that the reason for your visit was due to the contamination incurred by a dog that either howled within your house or spattered its urine on you. Here is the prescription from your doctor: You make a clay image of the dog. You place cedar wood on its neck. You sprinkle oil upon its head. You clothe the image in goat's hair. You set horse bristles in its tail. You take the image to the river bank and set up a reed altar to Shamash (god of justice). You then arrange twelve emmer loaves on the altar. Next you heap up dates and flour. You set out confections of honey and ghee. You set up a jug and fill two bottles with fine beer (not the cheap stuff!) and set them out. You next set up a censer of juniper. You libate the fine beer.

Following this you raise up the image of the dog and recite the following incantation: Shamash, king of heaven and earth, judge of the upper and lower regions, light of the gods, governor of mankind, pronouncer of judgement of the great gods, I turn to you, I seek you out. Among the gods, command that I live! May the gods who are with you command my prosperity! Because of this dog, which has voided its urine upon me, I am frightened, alarmed and terrified. Avert the evil of this dog, that I may sing your praise!

Once you have recited this before Shamash, you recite as follows over the canine figurine: "I have given you as a replacement for myself, I have given you as a substitute for myself.

I have stripped off all the evil of my body upon you. I have stripped off, I have stripped off all the evil of my flesh upon you. I have stripped off all the evil of my figure upon you. I have stripped off all the evil before me and behind me upon you.”

When you have recited this, you leave the presence of Shamash and you go off to the river and recite as follows: “You, River, are the creator of everything. I, so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, whose personal god is so-and-so, whose personal goddess is so-and-so, have been spattered with this dog’s urine, so that I am frightened and afraid. Just as this figurine will not return to its place, may its evil not approach! May it not come near! May it not press upon me! May it not affect me! May the evil of that dog be far from my person, that I may daily bless you, that those who see me may forever sing your praise! Incantation: Take that dog straight down to your depths! Do not release it! Take it down to your depths! Extract the evil of that dog from my body! Grant me happiness and health!

When you have recited this three times, you throw that dog into the river, do not look behind, but go to a tavern and its evil will be dissipated. (Adapted from Caplice, 1967, p.4-7)

From a modern, Western onlooker’s point of view, the preceding scenario might give rise to the notion that you were suffering from a condition known as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM IV) the essential features of OCD are recurrent obsessions or compulsions that are severe enough to become time-consuming (more than 1 hour a day) or cause marked distress. Obsessions are defined as persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses that are experienced as intrusive and that cause marked anxiety or distress. Compulsions are repetitive behaviours (e.g. hand-washing, ordering of objects, ritualistic behaviours, etc.) or mental acts (e.g. repeating words or phrases, counting or praying[!]) the goal of which is to prevent or reduce anxiety or distress, not to provide pleasure or gratification. Neither the obsessions nor the compulsions are due to another disorder (depression, schizophrenia, etc.)

With regard to OCD, it is worth noting that before its incorporation into medical terminology around the turn of the 19th/20th century, the English term ‘obsession’ carried the meaning of “the hostile action of the devil or an evil spirit besetting anyone.” (Oxford English Dictionary, OED, 2.) This finds its root in the Latin *obsidēre*: ‘to besiege, occupy or possess’. Thus obsession has behind it the imagery of an attacking army besieging and/or occupying a city. Descriptions from those suffering OCD bear out this sense of ‘obsession’: it is not voluntarily produced and is a passive experience: it happens to the person. (de Silva and Rachman, 2004, p. 3) As regards the accompanying compulsive behaviour/ritual, it is not an end in itself, but is intended to prevent a particular (usually negative) outcome. (de Silva and Rachman, 2004, p. 5).

The ‘prescription’ found in the preceding excursus is a *namburbû*—Akkadian for an apotropaic ritual from ancient Mesopotamia (from Sumerian NAM.BÚR.BI, meaning a ritual for dissolving evil). And it warrants explanation for those not familiar with the genre. The purpose of a *namburbû* is to dissipate or avert the evil which has been portended by an omen. Omens constitute a form of communication between the supernatural realm (generally understood to be the gods) and the human realm.¹ For the purposes of this article suffice it to say that, to the ancient Mesopotamian, life’s

¹ A full discussion of this topic can be found elsewhere: J.N. Lawson, *The Concept of Fate in Ancient Mesopotamia* (1994), F. Rochberg-Halton, “Fate and Divination in Mesopotamia,” in H. Hirsch and H. Hunger (eds.), *Vorträge gehalten auf der 28. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Wien, 6-10 Juli 1981*. Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 19. Horn: F. Berger & Söhne; Leo Oppenheim, pp. 198-227.

events were understood to be fixed, determined by the gods—but *not inevitable!* It is precisely on this logical contradiction that the practice of divination was based. The only way in which one can ‘divine’ what the future holds is for the future to be *predetermined*. Yet, once one knows what is predetermined in one’s future, then there exists the possibility of avoiding or changing it. Therein lies the contradiction which is at the heart of the practice of divination!

Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia

The entire idea is at once both simple and complex. Everything in the life of the individual and the group is predetermined, yet none of these things is necessarily unavoidable. Divination has to do with the belief that a bad fate, once prognosticated by means of an omen, can be avoided; and it naturally assumes that a good fate would be welcomed. It could be compared to playing the game of chess but with the ability to know in advance one’s opponent’s moves! Divination is not the wisdom of hindsight but rather the optimistic science of prognostication, based on the assumption that the very powers who have determined the events in the life of an individual or group are both willing and able to communicate these predestined events through different media. It is up to those concerned to avail themselves of the means to divine what is planned for them and thus, if possible, to avoid the bad fate (Lawson JN, 1994, p. 79).

Two questions need to be addressed: How did one divine the future? And, what constituted an omen? The first question requires a lengthy answer. Divination, i.e. communication between deities and human beings, took place using either one of two techniques: operational, that is, ‘provoked’ communication, or magical, that is, ‘unprovoked’ communication. (Leo Oppenheim, 1977, pp. 207ff.) For both techniques the answer provided could come as a simple yes or no, or it would be communicated by means of an agreed code accepted by both diviner (*bārû*) and deity. In operational or provoked divination, the deity is provided the opportunity to affect an object activated by the diviner. We have records of three types of operational practices which involve objects to be affected: the casting of lots, lecanomancy (the observation of oil on water) and libanomancy (the observation of smoke from incense). (Of these three, the casting of lots was not used for divining knowledge about the future.) In addition to these should also be included the *tamîtu* oracles—questions put to Šamaš and Adad by a priest on behalf of an individual and which would be answered by a ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ The only problem is that we do not have information on how the answer was obtained. (W.G. Lambert, 1966, pp. 120-123.) Finally, under the rubric of operational divination we have fragmentary evidence of necromancy. (I.L. Finkel, 1983, p.1-17.) In magical or unprovoked divination, communication is initiated by the gods themselves. The deities produce changes in natural phenomena: migrations of birds, monstrous human and animal births, astronomical phenomena, dreams, as well as myriad everyday occurrences in people’s lives. These phenomena could be recognised and interpreted as having special significance for individuals and groups. In the latter case, the belief that whatever happens within human perception is due to supernatural agency for the benefit of the observer, led the priests or scribes of the Old Babylonian period to record such happenings. (Oppenheim, 1977, p. 210) It is these unprovoked omens that form the basis of our comparison with OCD.

To the modern Western mind, which has been conditioned by high technology and scepticism, this entire process seems incredible. If the gods have determined the fate of an individual, then what is the point of providing warnings? Furthermore, if in addition to providing warnings there also exists a set of rituals which will remove the determined fate, then why do the gods bother determining fate to begin with? Again, it sounds like the chess game described above in which one knows the opponent’s moves in advance. Nevertheless, this was not considered by the ancient Mesopotamians to be merely a cosmic ‘game,’ rather divination—and the communication between mortals and

divinity—was taken in dead earnest.² We know this from several sources. First, there are the vast numbers of omens collected and the myriad observed phenomena they record and the outcomes they foreshadow. The omen series *Šumma izbu* contains more than two thousand omens derived from unusual births: human beings, goats, cattle, horses, pigs, dogs, gazelles and sheep. (Leichty, 1970 pp.2-3) The standardised series of *Šumma ālu*, found in the Kuyunjik (ancient Nineveh) library, consisted of as many as 107 tablets, with some tablets having more than 200 lines, yielding approximately 10,000 omens, each formulated in the distinctive casuistic style: a protasis (“If this...”) followed by an apodosis (“then this...”). It is significant to note that all of these approximately 10,000 omens are of the *unprovoked* type; they were simply phenomena which were considered ominous by the observers and thus worth writing down. Tablets 1 and 2 list ominous aspects of cities (from the appearance of fungus and ants to the flashing of light and the restlessness of pigs!). Tablets 3-18 deal with various aspects of houses (plaster, brickwork, etc.). Tablets 19-21 deal with the ominous significance stemming from the appearance of demons. Tablets 22-49 treat the appearance and actions of snakes, scorpions, lizards, small rodents and insects, cattle, horses, wild beasts, dogs, cats and pigs. Tablets 50-52 list the ominous significance of fire. Tablet 53 is dedicated to the king. Tablets 54-59 give omens from occurrences in fields and gardens. Tablets 60-62 list omens occurring in rivers and marshes. From tablet 62 onward the information is sparser. Tablets 66 and 67 describe the actions of hawks; tablet 79 crows. Tablet 80 records omens taken from the sexual behaviour of animals. Tablets 81-86 describe the ominous significance of a person's behaviour whilst sleeping and immediately upon waking. Tablet 87 records miscellaneous human behaviour. Tablet 88 contains various sorts of happenings within a country. Tablets 92-94 describe the appearance of strange lights. Tablets 95-96 list incidents which might occur to person on his way to prayer. Tablets 103-106 contain omens taken from human sexual behaviour and familial relations. And there are still other tablets, not definitively placed within the series, which deal with omens stemming from the appearance, behaviour and activities of various birds and aquatic creatures. (Moren, 1980, p. 2).

The foregoing list of omen rubrics from *Šumma ālu* has been cited for the purpose of making plain just how extensive is the range of observed phenomena which have ominous significance. There is hardly an area of human life in ancient Mesopotamia that is not touched by one or another of these subjects. This alone gives testimony to the pervasiveness of divinatory media in everyday life and occurrences. The gods were seen to use all forms of animate and inanimate objects as vehicles for their communication with mortals.

The typical omen is cast in casuistic form—not unlike law codes of the time. They are composed of two clauses: the *protasis* or “If” clause, followed by the *apodosis* or “then” clause. The protasis introduces the omen, whilst the apodosis gives the prognosis or the result of the omen (if not thwarted by a *namburbū*). For instance: “If a man's house is surrounded by water, that house's owner will soon die; that house will go to ruin.” (*Šumma ālu*, VI, 96, p. 119)

² Writing in their article “Magic in History” Wim van Binsbergen and Frans Wiggermann document the continuing impact of Mesopotamian magic on Western culture. They state that this “ancient magical tradition helped to engender modern science. Thus it can even be said to have contributed to the emergence of the intellectual stance from which we are now critically looking at that very same symbolic production.” (Van Binsbergen and Wiggerman, 1993, p. 8) “From a knowledge based on pure observation a posteriori, starting from individual cases that were fortuitous and unforeseeable, divination became thus an a-priori knowledge, even before the period of our earliest Treatises, i.e. before the end of the third millennium at least. That knowledge was deductive, systematic, capable of foreseeing, and had a necessary, universal and, in its own way, abstract object, and even had its own ‘manuals’... That is what we call a science, in the proper and formal sense of the word, as it has been taught to us by the ancient Greek teachers.” Bottéro, 1995, p. 136

Let us now explore a selection of omens from *Šumma ālu*.

Tablet 1

108. If female administrative officials are numerous in a city—[then] dispersal of that city.

111. If acrobats are numerous in a city—the city will be happy.

117. If butchers are numerous in a city, there will be severe illness in the land.

141. If carpenters are numerous in a city, that city will be happy.

171. If grass is seen in a city, that city will be devastated.

Tablet 5

1. If a house's foundations are laid on the 16th day (of the month), that house will be abandoned; trouble will be in store for it; it will be demolished.

27. If the snakes are coiling in the laid foundations, an order of the palace will afflict the owner of that house or he will be imprisoned.

31. If red ants are seen in the laid foundation, the owner of that house will die before his time.

Tablet 6

3. If a house's appearance is appealing, that house will not endure.

11. If a house's canopy is black, its inhabitant will have trouble.

12. If a house's canopy is red, the hand (of a god) will affect the house.

13. If a house's canopy is green, its inhabitant will not grow old.

46. If the walls of a man's house are hot, the owner of that house will die.

47. If the walls of a house are cold, that man will become poor.

74. If a light-flash is seen on the south wall of a man's house, the owner of that house will die/trouble for the house.

75. If a light-flash is seen on the north wall of a man's house, the mistress of the house will die.

76. If a light-flash is seen on the wall of a private room in a man's house, a daughter of the house will die.

Tablet 9

25. If the latch-hook of a palace is persistently sticking, the king will become poor; his assets will go away.

29. If the latch-hook of a palace is not latched inside the doorknob, the king's subjects will kill him in a rebellion.

Tablet 12

31. If fungus appears in the centre of the east wall of a man's house, the mistress of the house will die and that house will be dispersed.

42. If Numušda fungus is seen, husband and wife will divorce; that man will die; that house will be dispersed.

76. If there is green fungus in an entryway, that house will soon be abandoned.

Tablet 15

4. If water is spilled in the doorway of a man's house and (it is [shaped]) like a wild ox, the man will experience hardship.

15. If water is spilled in the doorway of a man's house and (it is) like someone holding his hand across his mouth, that man will experience loss.

Door-latches, fungi, grass, cats crying—omen series such as *Šumma ālu* make it clear that it was not only the extraordinary and bizarre occurrences in life which were noted—as many scholars contend (Starr, 1983, p. 3; Oppenheim, 1966, p. 36)—but it was very much the natural and commonplace as well. Finding a lizard in a storage bin or having a plentiful harvest of vegetables could not have been such an extraordinary experience for ancient Mesopotamians. Rather it indicates that the world of experience and perception was understood to be full of ominous significance. It is important to reiterate here what was stated in the introduction: the belief in, observance and collection of omens was *normal* behaviour in Mesopotamia. The practice of protective rituals (*namburbi*) was also normal. In fact, *not* to take heed of omens and then carry out the right protective rituals would most likely have been regarded as abnormal.

Having answered how one divined the future, we now turn to the second question: what constituted an omen? It is probably safe to say that *whatever held significance for an individual* at a given time—*whatever gave a person pause for thought*—could have been considered ominous and thus worth reporting and writing down. (Lawson JN, 1994, pp. 87-88) In other words, the list could have been infinite.

By way of comparison with the above omens, let us now look at some typical examples of obsessions:

1. A young woman had the recurrent intrusive thought that her husband would die in a car crash. She also had vivid visual imagery accompanying this thought: she would 'see' the scene of the accident, the two cars, the broken glass, the blood, and the people involved.
2. A young woman had the recurrent intrusive thought that she was contaminated by dirt and germs from strangers.
3. A man had the recurrent intrusive doubt that he may have knocked down someone crossing the road.
4. A young married woman had the recurrent intrusive impulse to strangle children and domestic animals. This would be followed by the thought or doubt that she might actually have done this.

5. A young man had the recurrent intrusive thought 'Christ was a bastard'. He also felt and impulse to shout this out during prayer or a church service.
6. A young woman had the recurrent intrusive thought that she might offend people by touching them in a sexual, inappropriate manner.
7. A young man had recurrent intrusive images of himself violently attacking his elderly parents with an axe. He also had the thought that he might actually commit this act. This experience included images of the victims, of blood flowing, and of injuries caused.
8. A young woman had the recurrent, intrusive impulse to harm herself by burning her eyes with a lighted cigarette. This was accompanied by visual images of the act.
9. A 14-year old girl had the recurrent impulse to blurt out obscenities in public. She also had the thought that she might actually do, or have done, this.
10. A young woman had the recurrent thought that she would not survive beyond the age of 28. (de Silva and Rachman, 2004, p.3)

As can be seen from the foregoing omen lists, there is at least a superficial similarity with regard to the significance of certain colours, etc. At this juncture, we need to consider two points:

1) Do omens play a similar *role* to OCD's intrusive thoughts? In neither case is the omen/intrusive thought *desired* or sought by the individual. Both interrupt the life of those concerned and can cause anxiety or distress. Both require a ritual action to neutralise them. The main difference between the omen recipient and the OCD sufferer would be that the recipient of the omen would *not* recognise the omen to be a product of his or her own mind. One of the cardinal features of OCD is that the intrusive thought is recognised as a product of the individual's own mind, albeit an ego-dystonic one. If it were seen as coming from outside the person's mind ('thought insertion'), it would constitute a psychotic experience.

2) As pointed out above, omens take the casuistic "If... then..." form: "If the walls of a house are cold, (then) that man will become poor." The person observing the omen has the *responsibility* of performing the correct ritual against the portended disaster—both for the observer's well-being as well as for others implicated in the omen. Can this not equate the OCD sufferer's excessive feeling of personal responsibility? Since psychologist Paul Salkovskis first demonstrated this idea in 1985, other researchers have confirmed this finding. A study carried out in 1992 showed that "of five factors related to intrusive thoughts, only personal accountability significantly predicted compulsions." (Osborn, 1998, p. 59) People in ancient Mesopotamia did not carry omen lists around with them—most could not even read. Thus, as stated above, whatever held significance for a particular individual, in that particular instance, became an omen for that person. (It could subsequently be checked with a priest or scribe.) Similarly, "what happens with OCD sufferers is that they appraise the [intrusive] thought—a split-second evaluation that is not in full awareness—and conclude, as Salkovskis puts it, 'that they might be responsible for harm to themselves or others unless they take action to prevent it.' All of a sudden an alarm sounds: 'I'd better pay attention to that thought!' Now the thought will not float by. It must be dealt with." (Osborn, 1998, p. 60) In the case of both OCD and divination, the significance given to the omen or intrusive thought is attached by the individual.

In their desire to systematise and classify omens, the scribal lists became increasingly extensive. Scribes “expended considerable effort in classifying signs and organizing them on topically coherent individual tablets arranged in logical sequence. As texts were combined into larger, more inclusive compositions, omens were added to fill in perceived classificatory gaps. The simple topical organization gave way to omens arranged in extended paradigmatic sequences. If something was seen on the right, a corresponding omen was seen on the left. A variety of schemata and permutations generated the expansion of the texts (such as up/down; north/south/east/west; white/black/red/green multicolored).” (Guinan, 2002, p.10) One result of this proliferation of omens is that, over time, recorded omens moved from the empirical and observable to the theoretical and deductive. This entailed a move from mundane, verifiable happenings which had ominous significance to fantastic and unverifiable ‘happenings’—that are sometimes referred to as ‘prodigies’. “By the first millennium the scribes appear driven to record every possible permutation, to combine every sequence of signs with every available context. They follow contradictory lines of reasoning, recoding omens that are observed and contrived, possible and impossible, real and surreal, historical and ahistorical, logical and patently absurd.” (Guinan, 2002, p.10) According to Jean Bottéro, 1995, “in a systematization that rejects all empiricism, all appeal to experience, all reference to a controllable reality, and ends up with eventualities that are entirely impossible, there is in the end a wish to record not only all that has been observed but also all that could be observed in theory, all that could exist, without ever having existed. And, in fact, for someone who does not have our biological evidence, if there can be two gallbladders, why couldn’t there be more, even up to seven, if the gods wanted it?” (Bottéro, 1995, p.135). From the present writer’s point of view, the proliferation within omens and omen series is mirrored in the proliferation and permutation of intrusive thoughts, e.g. checking. And both of these—the proliferation of omens and intrusive thoughts—fuel the proliferation of anxiety.

It is at this point—the proliferation of anxiety—that the *namburbû* comes into play for the ancient Mesopotamians. The specific purpose of the *namburbû* is to counteract and negate *any* evil predicted by an omen. (Oppenheim, 1966 1977?, p. 226; Caplice, 1974, p. 7). Given that one’s fate could be prognosticated through various means of divination, the next pressing question for the client of a *bârû* (diviner) who receives an ill omen would be “What can be done about it?” To learn of one’s fate—and particularly an ill fate—with no recourse to change it would be worse than having no foreknowledge at all. It is in this regard that the *namburbi*-rituals are of great interest. These often complex rituals evolved to ward off the evil predicted by omens of either the provoked or the unprovoked category and are related to the repertory of omen collections. (The *namburbi* will be discussed in detail below.) At this point it will be useful to turn to some examples of typical compulsions, as these are the corresponding actions taken in response to intrusive thoughts or impulses, much as the *namburbû* follows the appearance of an omen.

Overt and Covert Compulsions

Examples of overt compulsions (involving bodily actions):

1. A young woman repeatedly and extensively washed her hands to get rid of contamination by germs. The washing was done in an elaborate ritual, six times without soap and six times with soap, on each occasion.
2. A young man checked door handles, gas taps, electric switches every time he went past them.
3. A 15-year old girl cleaned and washed the area around her bed, including the wall, every

night before going to bed, in order to rid it of germs and dirt.

4. A man opened letters he had written and sealed, to make sure he had written the correct things. He would rip open the envelope, reread the letter, and put it into a new one several times before posting it.
5. A woman in her forties complained that every time she entered a room she had to touch the four corners of it, starting from the left.
6. A young man had the compulsion to touch with the left hand anything he had touched with the right hand, and vice versa.
7. A young man had the compulsion to empty his bladder before each meal. Even if he had urinated a short while before, he would go and empty his bladder prior to sitting down to the meal. He felt that otherwise he would not be able to enjoy his meal.
8. A young man had the compulsion to look back over his shoulder at any building that he was leaving. He would first look back over his left shoulder, then over his right, and then again over the left.
9. A young woman had the compulsion to wipe, with a wet cloth, all tables and worktops several times, each time that she was to use them. She did this to get rid of what she called 'invisible food particles'.
10. A 35-year old married woman had the compulsion to wash and disinfect herself and her clothes, out of fear of contracting cancer. She spent many hours each day doing this.

Examples of covert (mental) compulsions:

1. A man had the compulsion to say silently a string of words whenever he heard or read of any disaster or accident.
2. A middle-aged woman, who was distressed by the intensive repetitive appearance in her consciousness of obscene words, carried out a compulsive ritual each time this happened. This consisted of changing these words into similar but acceptable ones—for example, 'well' for 'hell'—and saying them silently four times.
3. A middle-aged man had the compulsion to visualize everything that was said in conversation to him, and what he was going to say in reply. He would not reply until he had obtained these visual images. Often this would take time, leading to long silences that were puzzling to others.
4. A woman, who was tormented by intrusive repetitions of bloody images of her relations and friends, felt compelled to reform those images, with the people concerned in good health.
5. A young woman became very worried if she set her eyes on black objects, especially before going to sleep. When this happened she had the obsessional thought that it would cause her to go blind, or lead to some other disaster. So, every time she experienced this, she felt compelled to visualize an object of a different colour, usually white, as a way of preventing these ill effects.

6. A young woman, who had the recurrent obsessional thought that she was responsible for any murders that she read or heard about, engaged in the compulsion of silently saying 'I did not do it' seven times, each time a thought came. (de Silva and Rachman, 2004, pp.7-8.)

From the world of OCD let us cite one full-blown example of overt compulsion: A person wants to go out for an hour. He first goes to the bathroom upstairs and checks that the immersion heater is off; then that the window is shut; then that both of the taps are off. This is not done in a quick glance, but (in the case of the taps) by turning each one hard and then looking. This is followed by putting a hand under each to check for the feel of dripping water (as eyesight alone cannot be trusted). Then come another turn of the taps, another look, a walk away and then another look back. Any slight deviation from what is 'usual' in the person's emotions or thought—or the appearance of the taps (which the sufferer cannot describe even if asked)—may lead to another repetition of the whole cycle. After the bathroom comes the spare bedroom (into which he has not been since the last set of checks) to look at the windows, the plugs and the wardrobe doors. He then proceeds to his bedroom to check the windows, plugs, TV being off, unplugged and the plugs switched off. He checks that the phone is not touching the duvet and that the bedside light is off at the unit. The light plug is then examined and unplugged. In the lounge, the windows, plugs and gas fire (especially the latter) are checked. In the kitchen, the individual checks: the windows, plugs, especially the kettle, the iron (wherein the plug has to be out and pointing away from the socket), the gas cooker (count them four times, look away, count again), the back door (four attempts at turning the handle), and finally the gas taps again. In the hall he checks that the phone is securely resting in the cradle and that the mobile phone charger is unplugged. Once outside, the front door is shut, then pushed ("Is it really shut tight?") and the handle is turned. To make certain the person breathes on the fingerplate to that he can see his finger marks in order to convince himself that he really did push the door. He walks away and then returns, repeating the whole procedure four times.

Such a prolonged ritual will have developed over a number of years in most cases. It may take over an hour, though the exact time depends on how long the sufferer intends to be away from home. If he is off for a fortnight's holiday, he might have a sudden thought that something was not done properly an hour from home on the way to the airport and have to come back to check something which he does remember doing (but cannot be 100% sure about) and which is unnecessary for most people. He will be more likely to take longer if he is anxious about something else at the time, and will definitely take longer if interrupted in his ritual, often having to go right back to the beginning and start again—or at least to a recognisable waystation such as the beginning ritual of a particular room. The French have called OCD *folie de doute*—the 'doubting disease'—and with the foregoing case in mind, we can certainly understand why. It is an epistemological trap: a seeming inability to trust what one knows to be the case ("I have only just turned off the taps...") or even to know what one knows!

This whole sequence is recognised by the sufferer as being nonsensical and unnecessary and is a source of frustration to him. However, he may lose this insight when actually performing the ritual, due to his anxiety. Initially the sequence of experience is this: an intrusive thought says "Are you sure that the tap was off?", and—if it isn't—something awful will happen, such as a flood, for which the sufferer will be responsible. This causes anxiety, which is reduced by the ritual, which in turn serves to reassure him that the bad thing won't happen because he performed the ritual correctly. After a while, however, he just experiences anxiety which the ritual reduces (if performed correctly), so his behaviour is targeted at an internal emotional state and not anything coherent or external.

What about covert compulsions? Sam, an adult with OCD, cannot remember ever being without obsessive-compulsive behaviour. His obsessions began with fears of contamination, but as the focal point of his obsessions changed, so did his rituals, which consisted of endless ruminations. Yet, in his own words “There has always been a compelling logic to the rituals. I was always trying to assure or avoid some outcome by my ritualizing.” (Rapoport, 1990, p. 50) Looking back on his life and early grapplings with his OCD, Sam writes:

But how can a little boy cope with his fears by himself? How indeed? Maybe I tried to impose an order on things. Maybe I convinced myself, in desperation, that there is an order of things, because I was my own last resort. But that’s ridiculous. There is no order of things. Ah, but there must be an order. It makes sense. It is logical. It is beautiful in its logic. It’s simply a matter of uncovering the order; working it out one must simply learn the rules. It’s a great leap of faith, but then I was a very scared little boy.

The rules. What are they? Simple. Counter bad with good. Offset. No one will help you. You must do it yourself. Others may not even be aware that the danger exists. Do good. And the good must be good enough to offset the bad because I am on my own against terrible forces. My efforts must be powerful enough to triumph. I must border on omnipotence.

Genetics. Predisposition. Activate the right buttons. Anxiety. Order. Ritualize. Twitch, twitch. The rituals must be comprehensive. They must be strong. To be strong means they tend to be complicated, tedious, taxing. The more serious the danger, the greater the required salutary effects. No one said this was going to be easy. Be strong. Fight. It is a huge responsibility you’ve got. Such power! Brook no weakness. If you’re weak, the forces of evil will triumph. Resist. Fight. Survive.

Power. My magic is powerful. It *must* be powerful. Look at what it’s up against. I must be careful. Always so. (Rapoport, 1990, p. 53)

Correspondence Between *Namburbi* and OCD Rituals

Unlike the recurrent, unwanted and intrusive thought that enters the OCD sufferer’s mind—and over which there is seemingly little or no control—with both the overt and covert compulsions there is a certain element of volition. The *urge* to carry out the compulsive ritual is, well, *compelling*—but the individual *knows* that he or she is engaging in a *voluntary* action. On page 7 above we queried whether omens played a similar role to that of intrusive thoughts—unprovoked omens appear without the conscious desire of the recipient and can cause great anxiety. In the same vein, we must now ask to what degree there is correspondence between the *namburbû* and the compulsive ritual of the person with OCD. There are at least four areas of correspondence:

- 1) Clearly, there is a similarity in that the compulsive ritual and the *namburbû* bring a relief from anxiety (for however long or short a time) and that neither is done for pleasure or gratification.
- 2) The ritual provides the omen recipient or OCD sufferer with some semblance of control over fears and anxieties.
- 3) The *namburbû* and the OCD ritual can be carried out in either curt/simple or prolonged/complex fashion.
- 4) Both the person with OCD and the omen recipient carry a responsibility for counteracting the impending disaster.

The correspondence between the *namburbû* and the OCD ritual is noticeable when we compare the language used by Sam with what we know of the *namburbû*.

Sam's Rituals (described in his words)	<i>namburbû</i>
Counter bad with good. Offset.	Dissolves evil/disaster.
Activate right buttons.	Perform the <i>namburbû</i> prescribed for the specific omen.
Order. Logic. Uncovering the order. Learn the rules.	<i>namburbû</i> works because of order established by gods and fate (<i>šīmtu</i>)—see discussion on pp. 2-4.
Power (over bad outcome).	Power over portended evil.
Genetics. Predisposition.	Fate (<i>šīmtu</i>)

However, where the two diverge is on the issue of the *source* of the protective rituals. For the OCD sufferer, this selfsame individual is the source of his or her ritual(s) for reducing the anxiety brought about by the obsession. For the Mesopotamian who received an omen, the diviner or scribe (see page 12 below) prescribed the appropriate ritual to dispel the disaster portended by the omen. Whether these rituals were originally individual and idiosyncratic (as with OCD) before being collected into series, we do not know. They are preserved only *because* they were collected, collated and written on clay tablets by the experts of their day. How did this begin?

Diviners and Divination

Writing about the roots of medicine, Roy Porter says “with population rise, agriculture, and the emergence of epidemics, new medical beliefs and practices arose, reflecting growing economic, political and social complexities. Communities developed hierarchical systems, identified by wealth, power and prestige. With an emergent division of labour, medical expertise became the *métier* of particular individuals. Although the family remained the first line of defence against illness, it was bolstered by medicine men, diviners, witch-smellers and shamans... When this first happened we cannot be sure.” (Roy Porter, 1997, p. 31)

So who were these “particular individuals” in ancient Mesopotamia? In his volume *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (to the kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, c. 680-648 BC), Simo Parpola provides a succinct overview. There were five scholarly disciplines which encompassed the sciences of their day:

tupšarru ‘astrologer/scribe’: experts in the art of interpreting celestial, terrestrial and teratological portents and the ominous significance of days and months.

bārû ‘haruspex/diviner’: experts in the art of consulting the divine will and prognosticating the future by extispicy and lecanomancy.

āšipu ‘exorcist/magician’: experts in the art of manipulating supernatural forces (including illness-causing demons) by magical means.

asû ‘physician’: experts in the art of curing diseases by means of drugs and other physical remedies.

kalû ‘lamentation chanter’: experts in the art of soothing angered gods by means of elaborate psalms and lamentations. (Parpola, 1993, p. XXXIV)

Each of these ancient scholars/were among a group known as *ummânû* or ‘masters.’ They were often skilled in more than one of these disciplines. “The technical lore of the Five Disciplines underlines the strong religious and metaphysical orientation of Mesopotamian scholarship: astrology, magic, divination and mystical philosophy, matters rejected today as pseudo-scientific, played a prominent part in it. True enough, mathematics, astronomy and linguistics also played an important role in Mesopotamian scholarship; but these ‘exact sciences’ too were harnessed to the service of the predominantly religiously and philosophically oriented Wisdom.” (Parpola, 1993, p. XIV) Any royal palace worthy of the status would have had any number of these scholars in its employ—all concerned with the person and role of the king.

It is crucial to our understanding of Mesopotamian scholarship and science that we grasp the *source* of their wisdom: divine revelation. (Lawson, 1997, p. 61-76) Berossus, a Babylonian scholar (and perhaps priest) writing in Greek in the 3rd century BC, recognised an essential aspect of Mesopotamian culture: the various arts and sciences which made their civilisation flourish were not the products of history; rather, civilisation itself was the product of divine revelation. In the first book of his *Babyloniaca*, he relates the myth of Oannes:

In the first year a beast named Oannes appeared from the Erythraean Sea in a place adjacent to Babylonia... It gave to the men the knowledge of letters and sciences and crafts of all types. It also taught them how to found cities, establish temples, introduce laws, and measure land. It also revealed to them seeds and the gathering of fruits, and in general it gave men everything which is connected with civilised life. From the time of that beast nothing further has been discovered. (Burstein, “The Babyloniaca of Berossus”, *SANE* 1/5, pp. 7-8)

In this understanding, *all* knowledge is the product of divine revelation and not the product of human inventiveness. In Mesopotamian tradition there is no differentiation between science and religion, sacred or secular—these distinctions simply did not exist for them. Rather, human history and civilisation are the transmission and implementation of the knowledge given them by the gods. The *ummânû* are the ‘inner circle’ in this transmission of knowledge and of utmost importance in their professional lives is the protection of the king, which is expressed frequently in royal correspondence in the phrase *maššartu ša šarri našāru*, ‘to keep the king’s watch.’ This largely involved ensuring that the king did not stray from the path decreed by the gods as simply opposed to keeping the king from physical danger. (Parpola, 1993, p. XXI)

This the court scholars did by watching for and interpreting the signs that the gods sent and advising the king how these signs should be reacted to; by guarding the king’s behaviour in cultic and other areas to prevent him from becoming cultically impure or from performing some task on an inauspicious day; by protecting the king from portended evil and divine wrath through apotropaic rituals and chants to avert evil and appease the angered god; and,

finally, by restoring the harmony between the king and the gods through ritual purification ceremonies that removed the king's sin and cleansed his persona of the evil or deed that had caused the sign to be sent. To protect the king against making wrong decisions, the divine will was regularly consulted, through extispicy, in matters of national importance. (Parpola, 1993, p. XXII-XXIV)

To anyone familiar with the ancient Near East it will be known that kingship played a special part in the life of society. (Cf. Henri Frankfort, 1978; Leo Oppenheim, 1977). The king was no less than the representative of the gods. According to the *Sumerian King List* (ca. 1950 BC) kingship was bestowed upon humanity from the gods. The king in ancient Mesopotamia was more than a warlord or an administrator of the realm. Certainly these roles played a large part in the life of the regent, but there were other functions which played equally important roles in the daily life of the king: Throughout Mesopotamian history the king interpreted the will of the gods to the people and represented the people before the gods. (Henri Frankfort, 1978, p. 252). In the Late Assyrian period there is great evidence of the king presenting himself as *šangu* or 'priest.' (G. Van Driel, 1969, pp. 172-173; René Labat, 1939, pp. 131-132; Oppenheim, 1977, pp. 98-100.) From early times the king was chosen with divine authority and thus the king was larger than life, as the term LUGAL implies—'great man.' (Thorkild Jacobsen, 1970, pp. 137-139) As the gods' 'man amongst the people' there was a certain degree of 'mana', as it were, attached to the king's person and royal regalia. (Lawson JN, 1994, pp.110-111 here). As representative of the people before the gods, the king was at times manipulated almost like a talisman, bearing the sins (known or unknown) of the community and making expiatory rituals for them.

Again, as the people's representative, a great deal of the king's time could be taken up in penitential and prophylactic rituals. When unprovoked omens of great proportions occurred, it was the king who was threatened by the evil—especially eclipses. According to Simo Parpola, every single occurrence regarding the substitute king ritual which appears in his *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* can be traced back to an eclipse—either lunar or solar. (*AOAT* 5/1, p. XXII) What becomes clear from the royal correspondence is that the evil portended by the eclipse was not something that would befall any king of Assyria, rather it was a fate decreed by the gods for that particular individual. The fate could not be avoided by mere abdication, rather another individual—the substitute—must take upon himself the fate portended for the reigning king. In the case of the king, it would appear that the portended evil could not be dispelled, rather it could only be transferred. However, the transfer could not be made simply to another private individual, rather that person must be the king. Thus the king consented—especially in Assyrian times—to forego temporarily his role as helmsman for the ship of state in order to become its rudder; manipulated by those who watched and interpreted the omens, so that both he and his kingdom might remain afloat. (Frankfort, 1978, p. 261) This was the substitute king ritual. In its execution we find nothing less than the direct application of the principles of divination and prophylaxis. (Lawson JN, 1994, p. 111). In the substitute king ritual we find both the gravity and importance of divination in Mesopotamian society as well as the most conspicuous and most public display of a *namburbû*.

The procedure for substitution followed this general pattern. First, once the eclipse portending the death of the king was established, the king would be notified of the need for substitution. It would appear that the decision whether or not to appoint a substitute was left to the king, as this letter from an exorcist to Esarhaddon would indicate:

"I am also worried about the impending observation of the moon; let this be [my] advice. If it is suitable, let us put somebody on the throne. (When) the night [of the 15th day] comes,

he will be afflicted [by it]; but he will sa[ve your life]." (Parpola, 1993, no. 240 K. 602, rev. 14-20, p. 191)

No doubt an affirmative answer from the king was taken for granted by the diviner, especially as the above lines in the letter contain both the rationale of the substitution ritual and the threat facing the king. In the event, once the king had decided to proceed with the ritual and had notified the chief-exorcist, a suitable substitute was chosen: a prisoner of war, a criminal condemned to death, a political enemy of the king, a gardener or a simpleton. (Parpola, 1970, p. XXIV) In general, the person chosen was either of little consequence to the royal court or was certain to die anyway. The man was taken to the royal palace, treated with wine, washed and anointed, dressed in the king's finery, furnished with the royal insignia and then enthroned. A young woman or 'virgin' was also seated with him as his 'queen.' At this point in the process the king and his substitute formally exchanged roles. The substitution had to be complete in order to be effective, thus throughout the period of substitution the king was no longer referred to as 'king,' as the correspondence shows, but as 'peasant' or 'farmer' or simply as 'my lord'. The substitute was regarded as king and stated to "govern all lands." (Parpola, 1993, no. 351, K1263 + K 20907, obv. 13-14) After the enthronement, the ill omens which were meant to befall the king were written down and then recited to the substitute king and queen, who then had to repeat these portents before Šamaš, the divine judge. This recitation would seem to effect the transfer of the ill omen(s) which had originally been sent to the real king. We are also told that in order to ensure that the omens would affect the substitute, the document on which the signs were written was then attached to the garments of the *ersatz* king! (Parpola, 1993, p. 12, ABL 676, rev. 1-8)

Fates portended by eclipses came into effect within 100 days from the occurrence of an eclipse. Thus the substitute king could remain on the throne for as long as 100 days or for far fewer. It would seem that the length of 'reign' depended upon whether or not another eclipse or other celestial portent was expected within the 100 days. If not, then it was left to the king when the substitute 'went to his fate' (i.e. met his death at the hands of court officials).

The seriousness with which portended fate was taken is given further evidence by the amount of verisimilitude involved in the substitute's life as 'king.' Texts such as the Nimrud wine list show that the substitute king was provided with an entourage about one/tenth the size of the actual court—including musicians, concubines, cooks, confectioners, etc.—all designed to make the life of the temporary regent as comfortable as possible. (J.V. Kinnier Wilson, 1972, p. 111). A sumptuous banquet was part of the daily routine. All of this, it must be remembered, was paid for out of the coffers of the real royal court. Furthermore, not only must the real king pay for the 'high life' of his substitute, but in addition there were the inconveniences of withdrawing from public life and being relatively 'confined' to the palace grounds. (Parpola 1970, *LAS* 35, rev. 299, rev. 7) All these factors surrounding the substitute king ritual combine to vitiate any notion that the fate (*šimtu*) embodied in the omen was not taken seriously. Nothing less than the authority of divine decree would lead the most powerful man in the kingdom to go through such rituals not only once, but perhaps several times in one reign.

However, all good things must come to an end, and so it was for the substitute king. The reign of the *šar pūhi* ended with the 'king' and his 'queen' being put to death. The reference to the substitute's death throughout the royal correspondence regularly employs the phrase *ana šimti + alāku*—a metaphor for 'natural death'—a death at one's appointed or proper time. We are not in possession of information as to the manner in which the *šar pūhi* died, but we can be fairly certain that the substitute king did not die of old age! Knowing that the substitute was, in any case, 'executed,' how can we square the meaning of his going *ana šimti* with the unnatural way in which

he died? The answer lies in the omen which triggered the whole substitution to begin with. The fate decreed by the gods was death for the reigning king of Assyria. Accordingly, as far as divine judgement was concerned, the *šar pūhi* filled that description. As the death was ‘fated’, and all people have a fated day of death, then insofar as the death was in fulfilment of the allotted time, it was ‘natural.’ Although it is a more elaborate form of substitution, the substitute king ritual functions on exactly the same principal as the *namburbû* with which we began this examination: the evil of an omen can be transferred to another object or even person.

Writing of letters from Assyrian and Babylonian scholars to kings of the Sargonid period (ca. 680-648 BCE), Simo Parpola states that “Under no circumstances are we justified in characterizing the Sargonid kings as fearful and ‘superstitious’ men completely under the sway of the court ‘magicians’ and ‘soothsayers,’ or the men who advised them as opportunistic charlatans who took advantage of the kings’ ignorance and fear to direct affairs of state for their own benefit, as has been done in the past. Far from acting out of fear or ignorance, the kings were following the highest dictates of contemporary religion and state ideology, while the men who advised them truly believed in the importance and efficacy of their craft and its ‘scientific,’ even divine, basis.” (Parpola, 1993, p. XXVII)

In their professional work the scholars appear to have been in the highest degree of the term’s implication, ‘men versed in the Scriptures.’ Everything in their correspondence makes it patently clear that their learning, way of thinking and professional competence were based on and moulded by an intensive study of the ‘Scriptures,’ the professional lore accumulated by earlier generations of scholars. This lore, which consisted of innumerable disconnected observations noted down over the centuries, had gradually grown into *a coherent system of interpreting and coping* [my italics] with the world conceived as a place dominated by gods and demons. Much of it would have to be dismissed today as unscientific, but there is no question that the ‘Scriptures’ were regarded by these scholars and their contemporaries as the ultimate source of wisdom, the validity of which was never seriously questioned.” (Parpola, 1993, p. XXVII)

The *Namburbû*: Rituals for All Seasons

A “coherent system of interpreting and coping”—this is precisely the implication of the title of Stefan Maul’s massive 1994 volume on the *namburbi*, *Zukunftsbewältigung*, which can be translated as ‘future-management’ or ‘coping with the future.’ In the final analysis, this is what the *namburbi* were meant to do: provide mechanisms for coping with or managing the evil portended by omens. It is fascinating to consider that we in the West inhabit a world wherein many of our psychotherapies deal with our *past*; whereas in the Mesopotamian world, their ‘therapies’ were directed toward the *future*. In the Mesopotamian world view, the past cannot be ‘re-written,’ but the future *can*. The *namburbû* was the means for re-writing the future.

According to Maul, there are six goals of the *namburbû*:

1. The affected person must soften the anger of the gods who had sent him the omen.
2. The person must get the gods to revise their decision to bestow an undesirable fate upon him.
3. The contamination that the person had already drawn to himself, through the appearance of the omen indicator, must be got rid of.
4. The contamination of the house and the milieu of the person, which the omen indicator

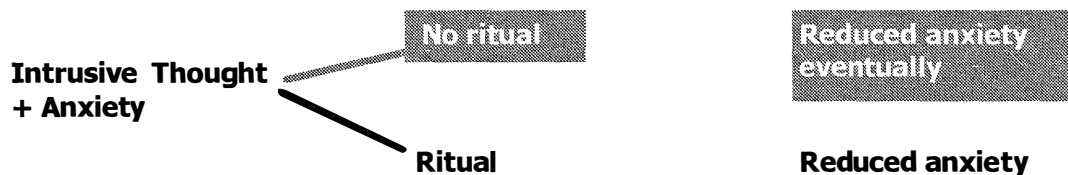
had spread, must be got rid of.

5. The person must be reintroduced into his normal, 'intact' living conditions.

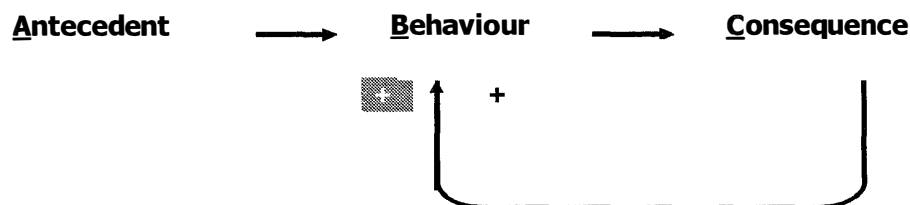
6. The person should be invested with long-lasting protection from a renewed threat by further disastrous omens. (Maul, 1994, p. 10, author's translation)

In the case of the obsessive-compulsive individual, it is the obsession or intrusive thought which leads to increased anxiety, which in turn must be managed. The compulsive activities or rituals are the means for coping with or managing the obsessions. As mentioned above, it could be argued that omen observation holds a similar role to the obsession/intrusive thought and that the *namburbû* is the compulsive ritual.

This accords well with the modern understanding of the mechanics of anxiety or "ABC of anxiety", wherein A stands for Antecedent, B stands for Behaviour and C stands for Consequence. In any particular anxiety disorder, the Antecedent situation has two elements: the anxious mood coupled with whatever situation or trigger about which the person is being anxious. For example, in obsessive compulsive disorder this will be an intrusive thought, in phobia it will be the phobic situation or object, in health anxiety it will be the physical symptom. In this situation a Behaviour then occurs. In the case of OCD this will be a ritual, in the case of phobia it will be avoidance, in the case of health anxiety it might be seeking reassurance from the GP.



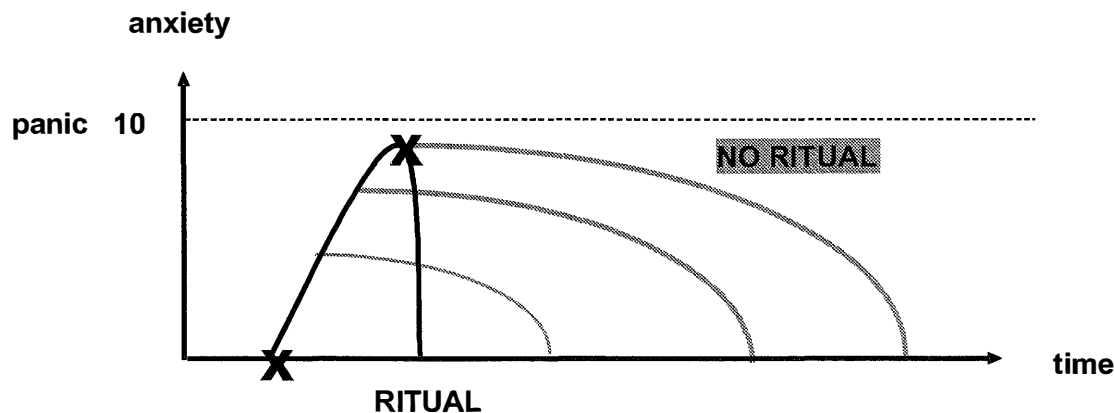
The Consequence of this behaviour is almost always that the anxiety reduces, albeit only temporarily. This then has a feedback effect on the behaviour, in that any behaviour that leads to a positive consequence, like reduced anxiety, will tend to occur again. Hence, the ritual, avoidance or GP-consulting behaviour will increase, creating a vicious circle.



A further consequence of this vicious circle is that the person's Belief in the truth of the intrusive thought, the need to escape from the fearful situation or the reality of the feared disease increases. Because the person is behaving *as if* the ritual has to be done, the object has to be avoided or the health situation has to be investigated, he then *believes* this. Logically, he may know that all this behaviour is unnecessary, but at a gut level, he *believes* what he *behaves*.



This can be drawn on a diagram, with anxiety on the vertical axis and time on the horizontal axis, demonstrating that the intrusive thought, the phobic situation or the physical symptom will increase anxiety and the ritual will reduce it fairly rapidly (though only temporarily).



The only way to overcome this cyclical chain of behaviour is to *change* the Behaviour. This means that the person would not do the ritual, not avoid the situation or object of fear, or not go to the GP for reassurance. Inevitably the anxiety will go up, but what the person would normally not discover is that after a while the anxiety will come down on its own. As the anxiety comes down, albeit after some time, this is a positive Consequence, which reinforces the previous Behaviour (which in this case is staying in the situation without the previous abnormal behaviour). This makes it easier to remain in the same situation the next time, which means that the anxiety does not go up so high and it comes down more quickly. After a number of repeats, the anxiety hardly occurs in the first place.³

Having explored a very involved royal *namburbû* in the form of the substitute king ritual, it is important to remind ourselves that *namburbi* were not only for the elite of society. Let us now revisit the *namburbû* with which we began this article, as it is representative of a *namburbû* which was for anyone. This is clear from the recitation the affected person makes to the river:

“You, River, are the creator of everything. I, so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, whose personal god is so-and-so, whose personal goddess is so-and-so, have been spattered with this dog’s urine, so that I am frightened and afraid.”

³ It should be stressed that the reduction of anxiety is only in relation to the obsession. Anxiety *per se* does not go away. Rather, in human life it would seem to be the corollary of ‘cosmic background noise’ for those astro-physicists who are seeking origins to the universe. Anxiety is a phenomenon of human existence, and in its particular manifestation, it can recur with another Antecedent/obsessional thought. This is not dissimilar to the proliferation within omen series such as *Šumma ālu* (as discussed above, pp. 7-8), wherein there would seemingly be no end of phenomena which could feed a person’s anxiety.

The “so-and-so” gives away the fact that this *namburbû* is an ‘off the shelf’ ritual—the priest need only fill in the individual’s name.

The incipit of the *namburbû* makes clear that this ritual is against contamination; in this case the evil/contamination brought by a dog. The prophylactic ritual includes making an image of the dog in question:

You make a clay image of the dog. You place cedar wood on its neck. You sprinkle oil upon its head. You clothe the image in goat’s hair. You set horse bristles in its tail.

Even with modern OCD, contamination (followed by compulsive washing) is one of the most common obsessions. OCD’s illogic of “how can I *know* that I’m *really* clean?” is paralleled by the omen (urine!) recipient’s taking the dog’s action to the realm of the gods. The person implores the gods via Shamash, the god of justice, that the “evil” portended in the action of the dog (simply doing what comes natural) might be dissolved. This is done by setting up an altar and making an offering:

You take the image to the river bank and set up a reed altar to Shamash (god of justice). You then arrange twelve emmer loaves on the altar. Next you heap up dates and flour. You set out confections of honey and ghee. You set up a jug and fill two bottles with fine beer (not the cheap stuff!) and set them out. You next set up a censer of juniper. You libate the fine beer.

Next follows the substitutionary ritual whereby the contaminated individual transfers the evil from his/her body onto the figurine of the dog.

“I have given you as a replacement for myself, I have given you as a substitute for myself. I have stripped off all the evil of my body upon you. I have stripped off, I have stripped off all the evil of my flesh upon you. I have stripped off all the evil of my figure upon you. I have stripped off all the evil before me and behind me upon you.”

It is interesting to note how many times the person repeats “I have stripped off all the evil”—one can only speculate whether, in the event, the person repeated the recitation verbatim or whether he or she carried on repeating the words for good measure. Whatever the case, it is clear that the repetition is important to the ritual. (We also note that repetitive praying is a common compulsion in modern OCD diagnosis. DSM IV referenc) Following the recitation over the canine figurine:

You leave the presence of Shamash and you go off to the river and recite as follows: “You, River, are the creator of everything. I, so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, whose personal god is so-and-so, whose personal goddess is so-and-so, have been spattered with this dog’s urine, so that I am frightened and afraid. Just as this figurine will not return to its place, may its evil not approach! May it not come near! May it not press upon me! May it not affect me! May the evil of that dog be far from my person, that I may daily bless you, that those who see me may forever sing your praise! Incantation: Take that dog straight down to your depths! Do not release it! Take it down to your depths! Extract the evil of that dog from my body! Grant me happiness and health!

When you have recited this three times, you throw that dog into the river, do not look behind, but go to a tavern and its evil will be dissipated.

As with many substitution rituals, it involves the destruction of the figurine bearing the evil, in this instance by throwing it into the river where the clay image is dissolved.

The closing instructions are easy to overlook, but they contain important elements which need explanation. "Do not look behind" is yet another means of ensuring that the affected individual is fully and finally separated from the portended evil. The results of looking back can be inferred in an account from the most famous ancient Near Eastern text—the Bible—and in particular it brings to mind Lot's wife after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Although they had escaped the judgement by leaving Sodom, they were still not safe, because they were enjoined by divine messengers *not to look back* at the destruction of the cities, lest they suffer dire consequences. Lot's wife did look back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Note that the *namburbû* involves offering, prayer, incantation, substitution, not looking back and not going straight home. This particular *namburbû* is of average length, and it can be seen that it is actually *series* of apotropaic rituals. Again, and it can only be speculation, but one wonders whether the original offering and incantation were augmented over time—much as obsessive checking leads to greater and greater rituals... *just in case*. This leads us to the curious injunction to "go to a tavern". Numerous *namburbi* end with instructions to the affected person that he should not go straight home, but to take a different road than the one by which he came and go to a tavern. In certain *namburbi* the man is told to approach a 'strange' woman—probably a prostitute—with sexual intent and to stay the night with her. Even after this, in many instances, the individual is told to go to another place and refrain from entering his own house for several more days. Such measures would seem to be extended protection inasmuch as the person stays away from his home and normal routines.

As can be seen in the *namburbû* we have just discussed, it is directed at a specific omen indicator: a person's being spattered with dog's urine. Many, if not most, of the terrestrial omens (as discussed above pp. 3-6) had a specific *namburbû* to counteract the portended evil. If there were no specific *namburbû* for a certain omen (which seems to be the case with many celestial omens) then a 'universal' *namburbû* was used. Universal *namburbi* acted somewhat like a wide-spectrum antibiotic, dealing with "the signs of heaven and earth, as many as there are". (KAR 44, rev. 6) The point being that there was a ritual for any and every eventuality.