



Internet Lodge 9659
United Grand Lodge of England
Province of East Lancashire
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Short Papers Competition 2007

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Paper 18/2007

Title ***TOMATO, TO-MAH-TO; Shibboleths Beyond the Craft***
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This paper won the 2007 Nova Award, for the best paper by a Brother who has been a member of the Craft for less than five years and who has not been Master of a Lodge.

That sore battle, when so many died
Without reprieve, adjudged to death
For want of well pronouncing Shibboleth.

--John Milton

A shibboleth is defined as any word, or indeed any usage of language, that identifies one's region of origin or identifies one as a member of a group. For Freemasons, the concept of shibboleth is important. It forms a part of our rituals, and our fellows are taught about an historical occurrence in which the use of shibboleths originated. In actuality, it is very likely that shibboleths of some kind have been in use since the dawn of Man, but certainly the story found in Judges must be one of the first recordings of the practice. In our order, the newly admitted fellow is told of the story, but he is never told why it is important and is simply left to ponder the significance of the term, and indeed, of the event.

Jephthah's shibboleth is by no means the only example we encounter of these verbal tests. In my particular corner of the world, the North American state of Kansas, the word "rural" is a shibboleth of sorts and if one pronounces it by dropping the middle "r" and ignoring the last syllable – rendering it as "rule" – one proclaims himself a true Western Kansas man, and not at all an Eastern Kansas fop. There are many examples of these harmless shibboleths and our daily lives are full of them.

More ominous, however, are the military applications of test-language, and more often than not they are used, as Jephthah used them, to determine life or death. A few examples:

In 1002, Saxons tested Danes with the phrase "Chichester Church," a phrase which certainly would have excluded Americans, as well. In 1282 the Sicilians revolted against the occupying French, and many French men-at-arms were murdered. The Sicilians used the local word for "chick pea" (*cicera*) as the test word, as it was difficult for the French to properly pronounce it.

In the early years of the 16th Century, the Netherlands were embroiled in fierce factional fighting between various warlords, bandits and foreign troops. One of these warrior chiefs was a Frisian strongman named Piers Gerlofs Donia. According to legend, his soldiers used the shibboleth "*Bûter, brea, en griene tsiis; wa't dat net sizze kin, is gjin oprjochte Fries*", ("Butter, bread, and green cheese, whoever can't say that is no sincere Fries"). The phrase worked as a shibboleth between the Dutch, German and Frisian pronunciations of "butter, bread, and green cheese." In Frisian, these sound like our English pronunciation. But the Dutch would say "Boter, brood, en groene kaas", while the German would pronounce it "Butter, Brot und grüner Käse." The wrong answer meant no green cheese for you and probably a pole ax to your *Uncle Ned*.

There are several examples of the practical use of shibboleths among the Arabs. In 1840 Ibrahim Pasha, commander of Egyptian rebels fighting against Turkish rule gathered his forces, many of them Syrians, who were press-ganged to join the rebels. Ibrahim Pasha fought the Turks in the Lebanon, and he was successful at first. However, with the assistance of British, French and Russian naval forces, the Turks put Ibrahim Pasha to flight.

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He turned about and retreated, coming down through Aleppo and Damascus and crossing the Jordan at the same fords that the Ephraimites had crossed, and met with such disaster in mispronouncing a word. Now, in all retreating armies there are stragglers, and many of them. As I have intimated, the Syrians hated the Egyptians, and when the soldiers, the stragglers, came to the ford the Syrians would ask them: "Are you a Shami (Syrian)?" "Yes, indeed," the Egyptian would say to gain favour and perhaps food. "Then say Jamel (camel)." "Gamel," the Egyptian would inadvertently say. Now there is no "J" sound in the Egyptian dialect of Arabic. The letter that is written the same is in the Syrian dialect sounded like a soft "J," really like the French "J," whereas the Egyptians always pronounce it like a hard "G," and accordingly said "Gamel." ... So the Syrian soldiers said "Jamel," they said, "Pass on, my brother"; but when the Egyptians said "Gamel," they said, "Iktul 'ameru," (cut off his life!) and they killed them just as the Gileadites slew the Ephraimites, three thousand years before at the same place.¹

Shibboleths, it seem, run deep near the Jordan. Seventy-eight years after Ibrahim Pasha's rout, Lord Allenby's forces re-enacted the scene with retreating Turkish forces by the famous fords, and the Arabic word for onion (لصب – *Buzszle*) became a matter of life or death;

The Turks in the Great War drafted the Syrians into their army and most of them were very unwilling soldiers. They were not in sympathy with the Germano-Turkish aims and plans. When Allenby made that wonderfully complete crumpling up of the Ottoman army in Palestine and across the Jordan in September, 1918, many who did not get caught in the net at first tried to escape by crossing from the east of the Jordan to the west side by these same fords of the famous river. There they met many Syrians, some soldiers and some civilians, and each fleeing soldier was asked whether he were Syrian or a Turk. If he said he was a Syrian, they said to him: "Say Buzszle"; and if he were a Turk he would say "bussel," for the Turkish language makes no difference in pronouncing the "Sod" and the "Seen," both varieties of the letter "S." The "Sod" is a heavy "S" sounded with the tip of the tongue down below the roots of the front teeth and the Turks pronounce it just like an ordinary "S." The Syrian ear is very discriminating to these sounds; and when they heard the word for onion come hissing out instead of lipping out like a tongue-tied child, they said "Iktul 'ameru" (cut off his life), and they slew many Turks at the fords of the Jordan.²

The New World also has its share of shibboleths used in war. In 1937, Rafael Trujillo, the military dictator of the Dominican Republic, launched a pogrom against Haitians living in that country. That purge, known as *The Parsley Massacre*, resulted in an estimated 17,000 to 35,000 Haitians murdered by death squads.

"What is this?" the death squad commander would ask, holding a sprig of parsley. If the person could pronounce the word – *perejil* - with the correctly rolled Spanish "r," he stood a good chance of survival, if not, death was the inevitable result.

Our ritual does not tell us why shibboleths are important, but we can venture a guess. Among other things, they demonstrate a sense of belonging, and a means of detecting those who do not belong. Our ritual is full of them, and we are everyday reminded how to know who is a Mason and who is profane.

Thankfully, none of them involve the application of a pole ax.

¹ Adams, Walter B. "Then They Took Him, and Slew Him at the Passages of the Jordan!," *The Builder*, Vol. IX, No. 4, April 1923.

² *Ibid.* C.f., Mackey, Albert G. *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, vol. II. Masonic History Co., New York, 1919 p. 686

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