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The Magic of Performance in Korean Shamanic Ritual – *gut*

Abstract. In this paper I will discuss the Korean shamanic ritual, *gut*, from the perspective of Peter Brook's work "The Empty Space" showing its various historical transformations, from a State ritual described in The Annals of the *Joseon* Dynasty and performed by Confucian officials to a Shamanic context after it had been banned during the Japanese colonization. The third transformation is within a touristic context, where the aim is to make the ritual attractive for tourists in the form of an aesthetic and quasi-theatrical product, staged to allow them an enjoyable encounter with one unique aspect of Korean culture.

Key words: ritual, performance, theatre, transformation, tourism

Shamanic rituals in Korea have always permeated and still permeate the consciousness and way of life of Korean people. On many occasions, divinations spoken by shamans in a *gut* guide their acts. As a manifestation of hidden connections between *sin* 'spirits', *mudang* 'shamans', and *dangol* 'common people', *gut* is performed to bring good luck, health and prosperity to the family and the community. As one of the essential layers of Korean cultural expressions, *gut* is a very vivid way of presenting and reproducing substantial values and views of the Korean culture. Furthermore, it is an experiential event of altering states of consciousness and crossing thresholds, which divide the different worlds of all of the participants – that of *mudang*, clients and gods/spirits.

In the first section of this paper, I briefly introduce the main concepts of the shamanic *gut*, such as *mudang* / *mansin* / *paksu*. Then I continue to present some of the important spirits that are commonly invited to appear in the ritual. In the second section, I provide an outline of certain parts, *gori*, of the Dodang event, while emphasizing their ritual, performative and theatrical aspects, i.e. focusing on what the ritual actually does through the medium of music, singing and dancing. In the third section, I offer some interpretive

perspectives on rituals which I refer to as *events*, and elaborate on the instability of this concept and its discursive transgressions through “empty spaces” between ritual, performance and theatre by using the concepts of Deadly, Rough and Holy as proposed by Peter Brook in his work “The Empty Space”.

The reason I have chosen this structure lies in the initial question of whether there are magic elements in the *gut* and how the chosen structure shapes the understanding of the meaning of ritual. I would contend that depending on the intention of the ritual performance (which refers to the meaning attached to the ritual event), one and the same ritual procedure creates different events – theatrical, performative or ritualizing ones – which allow different characterizations of the ritual and may or may not lead to its transformations.

I

Gut is the Korean term for shamanic ritual. Depending on the context, ritual in Confucianism is referred to as *jerye/jesa* and in Buddhism as *euisik/jae*. *Gut* can be performed as a seasonal ritual on certain fixed dates of the lunar calendar as is the case with the *Dodang* ritual, or it is performed according to the various needs of people who are requesting the ritual, e.g. in an unexpected life crisis. Apart from this, *gut* is always about establishing a relationship between people and their natural environment, while its performance can be acted out in various places. The performance of the *Dodang* ritual, for example, begins in front of an altar under a tree in an open space, and subsequently all of the participants start walking around the whole area in a procession. Depending on its intention and the needs of those who order the ritual, *guts* can be performed on a small or large scale. In a big *gut*, it is more than one *mudang* that participates, while musicians accompany them on their journeys to the world of spirits. Usually *mudangs* are specialized in one particular part (*gori*) of the ritual because the performance of each one of them requires exceptionally high skills. Traditionally, a *gut* used to go on for several days and nights, therefore more than one *mudang* was needed. Today, the duration of a *gut* is reduced to one day and is not performed at night-time at all.

The shaman – *mudang* or *mansin* in the case of a female, and *paksu* or *mugyeok* in case of a male – is not solely responsible for the performance; equally important are the spirits and clients. To become a shaman in Korea, it is necessary to receive a calling from the spirits, which is manifested through various changes in the behaviour of the shaman-to-be. Koreans call it *sinbyeong* ‘illness of the spirits’. When spirits unexpectedly take hold of someone, the person is urged to convey messages from them, to divine and accept them as their guardians. The *sinbyeong* can only be “cured” through an initiation ritual (*naerim gut*), after which the symptoms of the *sinbyeong* and the disease itself will disappear.

The possessed shaman performs the *gut* as a synergic interaction between gods/spirits, ancestors, and audience. The most important part of it is proclaiming it as *sasil* ‘truthful’, which means proving the ritual is effective and accepted by the spirits. If this purpose is accomplished, the ritual fulfils its pragmatics. *Sasil* was not performed during the *Dodang* event.

Another very important concept for understanding *gut* is referring to *dangol* ‘clients, which are ordering the ritual’, since the *mudang* can only act on behalf of others. As a mediator between spirits and clients, *mudang* shapes and guides the communication between them and their worlds, one visible and the other invisible.

Gods/spirits are, apart from the spirits of nature, mostly the deceased ancestors of the clients. They can be dissatisfied for various reasons, thus causing their descendants troubles from the realm of “beyond” and demanding proper treatment in order to be able to rest in peace. The gesture of reciprocity is manifested after a successful ritual, when good luck is sent from them to the client and their family. Apart from these ancestral spirits, there are other spirits which inevitably appear in a *gut*. I will mention some of those relevant for the *Dodanggut*: One is *Sansin* – the spirit of the mountain. *Sansin*’s iconographic representations on the *taenghwa* paintings depict him as an old man holding a fan, with a tiger by his side. He is the guardian spirit of the mountain and mediates between men and the mountainous environment. According to The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty *Dodangje* was initially performed as a prayer of supplication to the *Sansin* for protection from being devoured by tigers. Spirits of Generals and *Daegam* are also powerful spirits,

while their *goris* are highly performative and magical in terms of possession as well as the oracles provided by them.

II

Dodang ritual is held every third day of the third lunar month. Its theatrical décor consists of traditional altar arrangements in a spatial scenery which narrates stories about the nature of the invited spirits, the shaman's own protective spirits, their food preferences and ways to satisfy their needs. Early in the morning, the event begins with a *Samgaksanje* or *jerye* to greet the ancestors and offer them wine and food. It is quite unusual to observe a Confucianist rite before the performance of a *gut*. The reason for this double *mise-en-scène* is based on historical facts which, according to the aforementioned *Jeoson Annals*, show that the original *Dodang* ritual was a State ritual performed by Confucianist officials and was later forbidden during the period of the Japanese colonization. Current sponsor and organizer of the *Dodang* event, Cha Seung Hyeon, is also the founder and chairman of the association which aims to re-establish the original form of the ritual. The first part, which took place early in the morning, was a *Samgaksan dodangje* and was reconstructed following the old texts; it was meant as an evocation of its original form that was performed as a State ritual in *Joseon*. Its 21 *gori* are performed by two *mudangs* and some helpers, *gidae*. As far as the ritual is concerned, the most exciting performance and theatrical part of the *Dodang* event is the one incorporating the spirit of the General, *Jangun*, and his rite of *jakdu*, which consists of the shaman dancing on double blades, bound together and placed on a box containing uncooked rice on top of a clay jar filled with water. This is a kind of ritual culmination as this *gori* contains the most dangerous moments in which the shaman could potentially get hurt, although during the *Dodang* event, *jakdu* was performed in a somewhat simplified form. Before climbing on the *jakdu* knives, the *mudang* slowly enters an altered state of consciousness, while the helpers play drums or pray. When feeling ready, the *mudang* climbs on top of the knives and dances on the sharp blades. Then she divines using the flags of the divine generals, *Sinjang*, while waving the *obangsinjanggi* in the air. These are five banners of five different colours, each symbolizing a different aspect of human good



Figure 1. *Dodangje*. Ui-dong, Seoul. March, 2014. Photo by S. Zoric.

or bad luck which will affect a person's life according to the flag they choose during the divination. Black colour symbolizes death but has been replaced by a green one in recent times, in order to diminish the imagination of deadly consequences associated with this colour. Yellow represents unsatisfied ancestors who demand more prayers and ritual engagements of their descendants. Blue is the colour of anxiety and worries. White indicates connections with heavenly gods. The most auspicious colour is red, as it brings the greatest of luck. *Daegam* brings about the resolution of divining tensions. This spirit is responsible for household, business and material welfare. During this part, people from the audience are allowed to enter the ritual space, put on the *Daegam* robe and invite the spirit to take possession of their bodies. What follows is frantic dancing by the participants and general exhilaration caused by a good deal of obscene and lascivious remarks of the spirits aimed at their descendants.

III

Looking for auxiliary interpretive devices, which go beyond the observed parts of the ritual event, as well as grounds for contextualization, I found out that this ritual had actually sunk into oblivion at the beginning of the 20th century and had been replaced by the shamanic *gut*, but was ultimately put back on stage recently due to the interest of the local community in keeping it alive. Furthermore, it was obvious that the usual relationship which is essential for the *gut* – i.e. the relationship between *mudang* and her clients who order the ritual – was missing, while the audience consisted of enthusiasts who are anxious to keep cultural memory alive as well as of people who came to the *gut* just for the sake of entertainment. Through the speech of the organizer I came to know that *Samgaksan dodangje* and *Samgaksan dodanggut* have also become an item of Intangible Cultural Treasure (no. 42) of the city of Seoul.



Figure 2. *Dodanggut*. Ui-dong, Seoul.
March, 2014. Photo by S. Zoric.

How then is this *Dodang* event to be defined, characterized and interpreted at all? I would argue that there is no fixed and unambiguous definition of the *Dodang* event. To approach it as a multi-layered permeation of ritualizing, performing and using theatrical elements, I will follow Brook's idea of empty space as applied by him to theatre, and reconceptualise it by thinking further in the discourse about ritual, showing its performative and theatrical metamorphosis. This means that the data I collected on *Dodangje* and *Dodanggut* in the field open up room for reflections about its nature "between" ritual, performance and theatre. Following Brooke's description of the nature of theatre, this slippery area of "in-between" is described, as mentioned above, with concepts of Deadly, Rough and Holy. Their meanings are to be taken metaphorically, as they cannot be transferred to the *Dodang* event exactly as they were conceptualized in "The Empty Space". Rather, we shall examine how they can be appropriated and applied when explaining and understanding *Dodang* practices and their meanings. Brooke emphasizes that in the nature of empty space lies the ability to relate the visible world to the invisible. In *gut*, all spaces are full, so by 'empty space' I refer to the door between two worlds, the visible and the invisible, which is open only for duration of the ritual. And it is only during this limited time that participants/spectators can immerse themselves in the wholeness of Space (visible and invisible space) and – united in this communicative and interactive encountering event – play with gods/spirits who are channelled by the shaman's divination, *kongsu*, and narrate cultural stories or transmit transcendental truths through him or her. What is experienced in this openness is real for each and every participant – the same is true for gods, shamans and clients alike. Empty space between them manifests the invisible in various ways: in the shamanic visual images and thereafter articulated imagination in the words of spirits, and in the inter-playing, *nolda*, of audience with spirits and shamans respectively. However, empty space may also be potentially deadly because the open door between these worlds creates a space filled with danger. This atmosphere can be sensed during the shaman's dance on the *jakdu* knives which can seriously harm the *mudang* if spirits consider the performance of the *gut* as insincere. Brook is also very much aware of the dimension of the Holy and considers it unavoidable in theatrical acting. Shamans do the same, claiming to

be able to establish a relationship with this sacral world. Nevertheless, in theatrical acting of *gut*, the sacredness is not necessarily always present. The difference between theatrical and ritual sacredness in *gut* in rehearsing and learning processes of “twice-behaved behaviour” is that the first is a free choice of the individual, while the other is a forced, constrained and inevitable commitment to serving the spirits. The dimension of Rough manifests itself through the motivations and intentions of the *gut*, but also through the usage of low and vulgar type of language which breaks the boundaries of etiquette of prescribed Confucianist social communication.

IV

Ultimately, what is the *Dodang* event? For the sake of argument in this paper I called it an event, as each other concept ascribed to *Dodangje* and *Dodanggut*, such as ritual, performance or theatre would reduce its multitasking nature. I used “empty space” as a metaphor for the point of intersection where this “event-ness” could be realized.

Dodang event started as *Dodangje*, a State ritual prescribed in *Joseon* books and performed by Confucianist officials, not just as a symbolic acting out but also as an invocation of the Mountain Spirit for help. After the ritual had been banned during the Japanese colonization, it was then transferred into the shamanic context, and *Dodangje* transformed into *Dodanggut*. In this form it lived a second life and succeeded in surviving on the cultural margins in secret places hidden not only from the eyes of Japanese officials, but also of officials of the subsequent Korean military dictatorship, which oppressed all practices of shamanic ritual expressions because they were regarded as primitive and backward, thus, in their view, hindering the modernization process in Korean society. However, the performances of the ritual could not be prevented during these hard times. As performativity in the text was understood in terms of somatic/corporeal practices connected with transforming potentials, shamanic ritual discussed here as an event of communication between spirits, shamans and clients/audience doubtlessly fulfilled this function, albeit in secrecy. After the 1970's, while searching for unique characteristics of their national identity, Koreans returned to their shamanic roots, which they now considered to be representa-

tive, and started to look for the “original” meaning of *Dodangje* and *Dodanggut*, changing its nature twofold: 1) introducing Confucianist parts into the event, 2) performing the ritual not only for clients but for independent audiences as well.

Currently a third transformation of both *Dodangje* and *Dodanggut* is being discussed. The aim is to make them attractive for tourists, which disconnected/uncoupled from the Korean cultural context and self-understandable manifested meaning of the event for Koreans means that tourists engage with it in a very different way. The tourists are supposed to become familiar with the event in the form of an aesthetic and quasi-theatrical product, staged to allow an enjoyable encounter with one unique aspect of Korean culture. The question that arises with this third coming to life of *Dodangje* is whether it will remain a living part of Korean tradition or become cultural heritage as a “deadly theatre”, as Brook called it. *Dodangje* is not a *Joseon* ritual anymore; *Dodanggut* is not only a shamanic *gut* because it can be performed in an “as if” mode without the magic elements of divinations for clients, but it has also not yet transformed into a fixed theatrical form of a cultural heritage item.

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THE RITUAL YEAR 10

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Edited by
Tatiana Minniyakhmetova and Kamila Velkoborská

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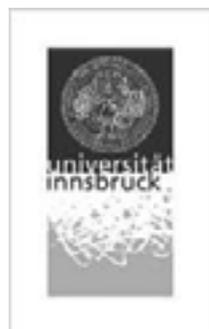
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