

Community Ritual and Social Structure in Village Korea

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INTRODUCTION

There have been a few studies done in Korea about the relationship between the village community and village festivals which are of particular interest to the social anthropologist. Although most of this research has been concerned with putting a historical perspective on village ritual, this essay will be dealing with the social function, or dysfunction, of religion in the life of village people. This essay is an attempt to understand the social meaning of village festivals in Korean villages. I spent nearly two years from 1971-1972 doing fieldwork amongst a group of shamans (*mudang* 巫堂) who performed village festivals along the coast of the Kangwön and Kyöngsang Provinces in eastern Korea. I had the opportunity to observe more than twenty village festivals and family rituals during this time, and the materials of this essay come from my own participant observation.

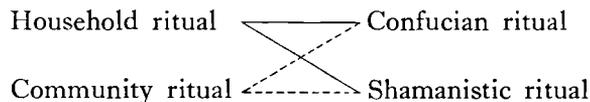
The territory of the east coast is remote from larger cultural centers, and the seashore itself is very irregular in shape, which hinders communication with these centers. The villages of the east coast fit Robert Redfield's concept of the little community as a small social system which is of the appropriate size for anthropological fieldwork. Houses are often close together in the fishing villages of this area, whereas they are generally far apart in the inland farming villages. Even though a village may be called a "fishing village," the villagers are inclined to think of themselves as farmers rather than fishermen, in spite of all the advantages of living adjacent to the sea. Although many villagers do in fact work on the sea or have some relation to fishing, they want to avoid any connection with fishing because it has been held socially

in contempt.

Generally, we may say that there are two typical types of village rituals performed for the prosperity of the village household and community. The one is called *tongje* 洞祭, and is a Confucian ritual performed by a group of selected village ritual elders known as *chegwan* 祭官. The other ritual, called the *pyölshin kut* 別神祭 or *tang kut* 堂祭, is performed by shamans on behalf of the villagers. These two types are part of a harmonious dual system which constitutes the religious life of these villages. Although a lot of ethnographic material has been collected on the *tongje* ceremony, I am especially interested in its relation to the *pyölshin kut*. Different views are held about the origin of these two types of ritual. One view holds that the *pyölshin kut* originated in the ancient period while the *tongje* originated only later, during the Yi dynasty. Others hold that the two rituals are descended from a common primeval ritual. In this essay I shall leave aside the problem of the age of the ritual type and devote my attention to the compatibility and harmony of these rituals to each other, and to the relationship between these rituals and society.

There is a dual system of household beliefs and rituals. It is composed on the one hand of a system of ancestor worship influenced by Confucianism, and on the other by the shamanistic ritual called *kut*. Thus we can see that there is at the same time a dual system of folk beliefs and rituals, with both Confucian and shamanistic rituals existing at the household level as well as the village level. These two types of rituals may be contrasted at many points. Confucian ritual is hierarchical, emphasizes the lineage, is esoteric, and regular; shamanistic ritual, on the other hand, is polytheistic, local, exoteric, and irregular.

Diagram of the dualistic structure of village ritual



First, the participants at Confucian rituals are limited in principle to kinsmen, while at shamanistic rituals the participants are not only the householders and villagers, but also persons from outside the village itself.

Second, the spirits worshiped in Confucian household rituals are usually the ancestors from the previous four generations and only patrilineal kinsmen are allowed to play a part in the offerings presented to the ancestors in this ritual. At the level of the community Confucian

ritual, the spirits of the village may sometimes be seen as the ancestors of a certain lineage or as the ancestors of all the villagers regardless of their lineage. It may be said that the village spirits are usually recognized as the village ancestors. Confucian household and community rituals thus differ in principle in spite of the similarity of the two ritual types.

Third, Confucian ritual is more concerned with the ancestors than shamanistic ritual is. Confucian ritual also tends to select out one spirit for worship rather than offering worship to a variety of spirits. On the other hand, shamanistic ritual offers worship to a polytheistic array of gods, deities, and ghosts. An ancestor who is the main object of worship in the Confucian ritual is nothing but one god among the many polytheistic deities of shamanism, such as the mountain god (*san shin* 山神), martial spirits (*changgun shin* 將軍神), Buddhist gods, and the spirits of persons who died an unhappy death (*chap shin* 雜神).

Fourth, the two ritual types are distinguished by a difference in the character of the religious service. The Confucian household ritual is performed by ritual elders who are near kinsmen of the ancestors, and the community rituals are performed by ritual elders called *chegwan*, who are elected by the villagers themselves. The elders serve in the Confucian rituals by offering prayer upon the altar dedicated to the ancestors. The shamanistic ritual, however, has more complicated aspects, as for example, its complexity, overall size and the number of ritual elders. The ritual is performed mainly by shamans with the support of the villagers or householders. Usually the rituals are carried out jointly with the ritual elders. This type of shamanistic ritual is the largest festival to occur in village life.

Fifth, while Confucian rituals occur regularly either once a year or twice a year in the spring and autumn, shamanistic rituals are performed at regular intervals which vary from village to village, once every two, three, five, seven, nine, or ten years. Sometimes they occur at irregular intervals. It can be said that the wealth or poverty of a village is reflected in its shamanistic rituals. Failures in farming or fishing may cause the festivals to be performed at irregular intervals. On the other hand, wealth gained from farming or fishing could make the ritual interval larger or shorter.

HOUSEHOLD *Kut*

In April of 1971 I observed a *kut* sponsored by a seventy-eight-year-old woman, Mrs. Yi, who was living alone in Tongnae. This was the third large *kut* that had been performed for her. When she was young, she had given birth to two girls, one who died at childbirth and

one who died in childhood. Her husband also had a concubine by whom he had children. Mrs. Yi, who has been earning a living on her own since her separation from her husband, managed to save enough money to buy a little mountain, about two kilometers away from her home. Recently, she became worried about how her property would be used after her death. Because of her age she thinks constantly about how she should use the property while she is still alive. She did not want to give a cent to her husband's children (the children of her husband's concubine) and so she made the decision to hold a *kut* for her soul in perpetuity. Even if she gave the property to her husband's children, she did not believe that they would hold a *kut* for her after her death. Thus, she decided to spend her money for a large ritual to transform her soul into an ancestral spirit soon after her death.

This shamanistic ritual for the dead is commonly called an *ogu kut* or a *sanogu kut*, and is performed for persons at their own request. The latter is for people before their death, while the former is performed for people who have already died. In an open space in front of her house a tent was built, and an altar was erected in the center of one of the sides of the tent. In the center of the tent the shaman would perform with her back to the altar, while the front of the tent was crowded with many old village women. Eleven ancestral tablets were placed on the altar, bearing the names of her husband, his concubine, Mrs. Yi's two children, and her husband's ancestors back four generations.

The ritual took three days and nights. There are six main components of the *kut*.

(1) A purification rite called *pujong kut* is performed by a female *mudang* who sings shamanistic songs to invite the gods. Water is sprinkled all around the ritual area and the altar. This rite is a symbolic rite which separates the profane and sacred worlds.

(2) The *kolmaegi kut* is a rite addressed to the tutelary spirits of the village, the *kolmaegi*, who are usually conceived to be a conjugal unit. The shaman sings, and dances with a bamboo pole that is fixed into the ground during the ritual.

(3) The *ch'omangja kut* is a rite addressed to the *mangja* 亡者 or ghosts of those who have died recently. The *mudang* weeps and shouts while giving an oracle after being possessed by the ghosts or ancestors. When the spirit of Mrs. Yi's husband took possession of the *mudang's* body it sympathized with her in her affliction, and made an apology for having taken a concubine while he was alive. In this process, the shaman narrates rhythmically a story about a new Buddhist nun (*shinjung taryöng*). This tale is about a girl born as an orphan who grew to womanhood through much hardship, and finally married a young soldier. Her

husband died at war not long afterward. Because she could not endure her misfortune, the young woman went to a temple to become a Buddhist nun. The motivation to become a Buddhist nun reflected in this story is to avoid social life.

(4) The *paridegi kut* is the principal component of the *sanogu kut*, and usually takes about four hours to perform. The shaman narrates the longest known shamanistic story. This story begins with the birth of the heroine *Parigongju* who is the last of seven daughters by King Ogu. The king anxiously wanted a son to succeed him and abandoned his last daughter on a mountainside because of his great disappointment. The girl was subsequently raised by a mountain god. The daughter's abandonment caused her parents to become critically ill. The daughter then came back to her parents' home, and went on a long journey to the spirit world to look for a spiritual medicine to cure her parents' illness. During the journey she married a young man in the spirit world and gave birth to three sons. After curing her parents' illness, she became a shaman to guide the spirits of the dead into paradise. Her sons became the principal stars of *pukdu chilsong* 北斗七星, the pole star. After the telling of the story is finished, the shaman makes a human image out of white paper which is said to symbolize the spirit of the dead. This is then attached to a dried flower, and is said to symbolize the transformation of the ghost into an ancestral spirit.

(5) The *yongsan maji kut* is a rite to send the dead into paradise. While singing songs, the shamans push the ancestral tablets along a white strip of cloth in the direction of a post erected at the far end. The cloth symbolizes the road to paradise.

(6) The last rite, *köri kut* is a magic ritual addressed to all sorts of evil spirits, especially those of people who had an unhappy death. This rite aims at driving out evil spirits who come as beggars to the sacred place. By casting a magic spell on these spirits, the *mudang* guards the members of the family against any beggars in the neighborhood.

This *sanogu kut* varies in scale depending on social, religious, and economic factors. Confucian ritual, on the other hand, is nothing but an obligation to the ancestors regardless of wealth.

The theme of ritual function is not clear with regard to the solidarity of the family or household. The exoteric ritual is open to villagers, friends and even strangers. Sometimes strangers can participate in the dancing for their own good fortune. Its more important points are its psychological and religious aspects. The shaman often talked about Mrs. Yi's personal history in public. Because Mrs. Yi was

afraid that she would die without having a child and heir, the *mudang's* remarks caused the audience to sympathize with her. Mrs. Yi thus could content herself with the psychological and religious aspects of the ritual.

COMMUNITY RITUAL

Nomul 老勿 is a seashore village on the shore of Kyöngbuk Province consisting of 1,112 persons who occupy 186 households. The village is composed of two parts, divided by a stream that runs down from the mountain behind the village and empties into the East Sea. Villagers farm or fish or do both. Surnames in the village are principally Ha 河, Kim 金, Yi 李, Ch'oe 崔, Shin 申, and Pak 朴, but there is no dominant surname.

The village shrine (*sönang-dang* 城隍堂) stands amidst a rocky grove of trees on the hill behind the village. Set on an altar in the shrine are two wooden tablets containing the name of the two founders, An 安 and Pak. According to a village legend, An and Pak founded the village about 1,200 years ago. Since that time, the people have worshiped the founders as the tutelary spirits of the village.

The Confucian ritual *tongje* is performed for these spirits four times a year, on the fourteenth day of the first lunar month, and again in the third, sixth and tenth lunar months. A village committee of about ten men collects a contribution for the rituals from all the households, and some houses will make a special contribution.

The village head usually chooses three ritual elders from among the village men. They must keep ritual purity by avoiding contact with menstruating women, with women who within the past week have given birth to a child, and with corpses. The ritual elders who are selected for the ceremony are forbidden by a taboo to quarrel or to have sexual intercourse. They must live apart from their family and take a bath for purification a few days before the ritual. If a death occurs in the village within the sacred period, the dead person is buried temporarily without a funeral ceremony, for such a ceremony would create a state of impurity in the ritual. If there is a woman who is in her last month of pregnancy, she is forced to go to another village until the ritual is finished. Within the taboo period a straw rope is stretched around the ritual area and a handful of soil is sprinkled around the shrine to symbolize the sacred nature of the place.

The ritual offerings of the *kolmaegi* are two dishes or rice, soup, wine, pork, fish, fruits, and rice-cakes. The ritual elders bow low, read an address of blessing to the spirits, and burn sheets of paper they are holding in their hands. A bright flame stands for a good

fortune. After the last bow they drink some wine to commune with the spirits. The day after the ritual many villagers participate in a tug of war, and there is a meeting of all the household heads to settle the accounts for the cost of the ritual.

A shamanistic ritual, *pyölshin kut*, is one of the largest rituals in Nomul, occurring once every ten years. I observed this ritual in 1972. This ritual is performed by fifteen shamans in addition to the ritual elders of the village. Among the shamans there are four married couples. Although they themselves use the name *mudang*, it is regarded as a term of derision and disrepute. Even today, the *mudang* are despised, and placed at the bottom of Korean society. The *mudang*, being an endogamous and occupational group, have some caste-like characteristics, but lack any religious sanction for their group as is characteristic of the Hindu social system.

Household and community rituals have the same fundamental structure, but they are different in content, style, social level, and other aspects. Some ritual processes are common features of the two types of ritual, while other processes are omitted. The first and last processes of a *kut* are common to both in pattern, but the latter is more elaborate in the community ritual. I will outline below the community ritual (*pyölshin kut*) held in Nomul village on 27 April 1972.

On 2 March 1972 the village head made a contract with a male shaman (*kümjul*) to lead a shaman group for the ritual. The agreement reached fixed the ritual fees, the number of shamans, and reparation for damages or loss by a breach of contract to the injured party. Thereafter a committee for overseeing the ritual was organized. The committee included many individuals from every family, some political organizations, and associations for the elderly (*noinhoe* 老人会). The number of committee members consisted of more than seventy men drawn from among the village households. The committee elected a chairman and two vice chairmen on the basis of their long experience in religious or political leadership. The role of supervisor and general manager for the ritual was played by the administrative leaders. The *pyölshin kut* is performed mainly by shamans and consists of nine stages.

(1) The opening rite of the ritual begins with *mun kut* or "Door Opening Rite" on the night before the main ritual takes place. All the participating shamans dance in a circle to the shamanistic music.

(2) The *chesa* or Confucian ancestral rite is performed at midnight by the chosen ritual elders. The ritual processes are the same as the *tongje*.

(3) The *pujöng kut* or purification rite is the same as the one in the household ritual described above.

(4) In the *tangmaji kut* a ritual elder holds a long bamboo pole on the ground with his hands while a shaman chants an incantation to facilitate the descent of the spirits. The stirring of the rod is regarded as a sign of the possession of the pole by the village spirits. A ritual elder then carries the pole in his hands, while leading a village procession.

(5) In the *sejŏn kut* a shaman tells a long story about the birth of three sons through an illicit union between a Buddhist monk and a virgin. According to the story these three sons became the guardian spirits of childbirth and children.

In this rite, a shaman and an elder perform the role of monks who steal property for the village from other villages. This story emphasizes the accumulation of wealth over the morality of not stealing.

(6) In the *shimch'ŏng kut* a shaman tells a story which is similar to one of the most popular novels of the Yi Dynasty. But the story of the *shimch'ŏng kut* emphasizes the power and health of the eyes, whereas the novel *Shimch'ŏng chŏn* 沈清伝 emphasizes filial piety. As strong eyes are important for seamen in their work, this change of emphasis indicates an important concern of these fishermen. The story is told about a girl who was born to a blind man. Her mother died soon after childbirth.

(7) In the *ch'ŏnwang kut* a mask dance is performed. Although the content of this dance is similar to mask dances performed in Seoul, Yangju, and southeastern Korea, the *ch'ŏnwang kut* mask dance has a different theme. A fierce conflict between the wife of a *yangban* 兩班 and his concubine brings the husband to the point of death. At this point, the two women see the need for cooperation and harmony, which in turn saves their husband's life. The point of this drama reflects the moral system of village society and of the shamans, which tolerates polygamy.

(8) The *yongwang kut* is a rite for worshiping the Dragon King or Sea Spirit. A shaman performs a ritual service for each of the spirits of villagers who have died at sea, after which the sacrificial offering is thrown into the sea.

(9) The *kŏri kut* is the final rite in the series and is performed for demons known to be harmful to humans. This *kut* is common to virtually every *mudang kut*, but the length and complexity of its form varies from region to region. It is also the most elaborate type of *mudang kut*. In this *kut* the male shaman plays many roles, such as a blind man, a fisherman who died at sea, and a woman who died in childbirth.

CONCLUSION

Villagers estimate the effects of these two kinds of rituals by their effect on the attitude of the spirits. Even if some deaths occur in the village after the ritual they may speak of the indebtedness of the spirits to them, saying that if the spirits were not benevolently inclined there would have been more deaths in the village. A year without an accident may be seen as a sign that there is no good fortune for that year, or it may also be seen as a sign that the village is under the protection of the spirits. Either way, most villagers are inclined to think about village affairs in religious terms.

As mentioned above, there are two types of ritual performed in the traditional village society. I was very interested in the shamanistic ritual, the *pyölshin kut*, which has strong festive elements. Many scholars say that ritual creates bonds of solidarity which integrate the members of a village into a whole. It can be said that the *pyölshin kut* also functions to strengthen the solidarity of the villagers, but this is not always the case. Through ritual, village solidarity is strengthened within the village associations and lineages. The *tongje* is, compared to the *pyölshin kut*, open to outsiders. There is an equal opportunity given for anyone to participate in the ritual dance. Moreover, villagers hospitably entertain their guests from other villages. Although the villagers are conscious of a strong sense of village identity as hosts to the outsiders, the fact that outsiders are allowed to participate in certain rites indicates that village rites may also serve to strengthen ties with people beyond the confines of the village.

I think that it is better to understand ritual as a symbol of social structure, as maintained by such anthropologists as R. Firth, E. Leach, M. Fortes and others. The main reasons for this analysis follow.

First, ritual is not necessarily the core element of a society. It seems to me that a society makes use of ritual for the solidarity of the villagers. In other words, a ritual by itself is powerless to give expression to any social concept which is not already present, at least latently, in the society.

Many informal, unconscious, or latent concepts become manifest in ritual. Villagers can be made to strengthen their sense of local solidarity through *pyölshin kut*, but this is not true with the *sanogu kut*, a household ritual, where the sense of locale is weak. Thus, the effect of shamanistic ritual varies according to its level.

Secondly, the strengthening of village cohesion is best done through the use of the principle of locality. Villagers separated by lineage ties may unite around or be drawn together by a sense of the emotional ties of belonging to the same village. Individual or lineage differences

are played down and village co-operation in these rituals is stressed.

These rituals are nothing more than the strengthening of social cohesion by means of locality. The ritual makes social structure manifest. The social system of the whole village is operated principally under the leadership of religious figures and aged men, and is reinforced by an administrative system with political power. The *mudang* and aged men in the village context have more actual power than the *tongjang* 洞長, who represents official political power.

The shaman's song, *Paridegi*, explains the village social structure to us. In the story, primogeniture and patrilineal succession is stressed. In the *Shinjung taryöng*, the heroine's conversion to Buddhism is motivated by a desire to escape from the failures of real life, which is a negative attitude toward religion. In the *Tanggumagi* story we learn that although premarital sexual intercourse is considered immoral, it may be tolerated after the birth of a son. Patrilineality takes precedence over conventional morality. The world of the dead is dependent upon the ancestral rituals performed by living persons, particularly male descendants. This demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between the dead and the living.

The attitudes toward the higher and lower forms of spirits are markedly different. While man welcomes and worships the higher spirits, he threatens and drives away the lower, evil spirits. It is a very common fact of Korean village life that the villagers may pay more respect to the powerful spirits, such as the ancestors, and on the other hand neglect the weaker spirits. Because of the respect for the ancestors, villagers can tolerate polygamy and other actions which are contrary to conventional social mores.

I will conclude this article by stating that it is uncertain whether a ritual itself can function as a means for social integration. Rather it seems to me that society utilizes ritual in order to function.