

## Physical Techniques Displayed by Divine Characters in Korean Mask Dramas

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### 1. Introduction

Physical techniques employed in India's Kathakali, China's Beijing opera and Japan's Noh are so highly systematized that an actor can express the whole gamut of emotions and situations with his countenance and gestures. In contrast, Korean mask dramas do not have methodized physical techniques. Yet, the performances of the divine characters in the dramas mirror the physical techniques used by the characters' ancestral forms.

This study aims to gain deeper insights into the physical techniques exhibited by divine characters in Korean mask dramas, including how they act and convey their feelings to the audience.

The divine characters have their roots in either traditional rites or exorcism rituals called Narye. This study reveals the genesis of divine beings in extant mask dramas and explores the physical techniques displayed by each character in connection with its origin. An in-depth look at these characters will illuminate how Korean mask dramas evolved from religious performances into theatrical art forms.

### 2. Physical techniques displayed by divine characters originating from traditional rites

The Korean people settled in the Korean Peninsula and neighboring southern Manchuria about two millennia ago. They observed two types of rituals: agricultural rites to pray for a bountiful harvest, and religious rites. The Puyo, Koguryo and Ye states, which spanned the northern part of the peninsula, had religious rituals called Yonggo, Tongmaeng and Muchon, respectively. Meanwhile, people in the Mahan confederation, which covered the southwestern part of the peninsula, performed agricultural rites and worshipped gods in May, when the fields had been sown, and in October at the end of the harvest season.

Dongje, a rite in which people sing, dance and play instruments to pay tribute to a local tutelary god, is strikingly reminiscent of ancient religious rituals described in the chapter "Dongyizhuan" of "Sanguo Zhi," a chronicle of China's Three Kingdoms compiled in the third century.

Today's Dongje, a village ritual, preserves the purpose and function of ancient religious rites, which were national events. How people in the early Joseon period (1392-1910) celebrated Dongje is illustrated in the chapter on Goseong, South Gyeongsang Province, in Volume 32 of "Sinjeung Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam," a 16<sup>th</sup>-century book on Korean geography. On the other hand, a glimpse into Dongje in the late Joseon Dynasty is provided by "Dongguksesigi," a book on traditional seasonal events published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its chapter "December" refers to the custom in Goseong, Gangwon Province, including the Dongje conducted in the region at the year-end. In Dongje, the book says, villagers called forth their guardian god at a local shrine and performed, visiting not only the village office but also people's houses. It should be noted that, in this ritual, the god was represented by a mask. Similarly, in Hahoe Village, Andong, North Gyeongsang Province, which is famous for its Hahoe Pyolshin-gut T'al-nori mask drama, the local tutelary deity is symbolized by a mask. These facts suggest that the masks of guardian gods used in Maeul-gut-nori ("performance in Dongje") acted

as a catalyst for creating mask dramas.

Among extant mask dramas, Hahoe Pyolshin-gut T'al-nori and the Gangneung Gwanno Mask Drama of Gangneung, Gangwon Province, were originally performed as part of rituals to pray for an abundant harvest. The divine characters in these dramas are derived from traditional rites that Koreans have passed down from ancient times.

### (1) Kakshi

Kakshi, the tutelary goddess of Hahoe Village, is a masked character in Hahoe Pyolshin-gut T'al-nori. According to legend, she married into a family in this village, but as her husband died soon after marriage, she lived alone for the rest of her life. After her death, she became the guardian of the village. Most Kakshi masks have an impassive face brimming with *han*, or deep sorrow. The lips are closed tight, and the eyes look down.

Hahoe Pyolshin-gut T'al-nori is a big village festival usually conducted once a decade – it can be held only when an oracle is received. The festival starts with prayer at a village shrine perched on a hill: people ask the local deity to descend to the shrine. Then, they walk down the hill, with the Mudong Dance (a dance performed on the shoulders of a person) performed by a dancer wearing the mask of Kakshi. This dance serves to manifest the presence of the deity (Photo1). Standing on the shoulders of another performer, Kakshi asks spectators for donations. She never talks to people. She just looks down at them and moves her hand as if to bless the village and villagers. After all these rites, the *t'al-nori* (“mask drama”) is staged.

### (2) Jangjamari

Jangjamari appears in Scene 1 of the Gangneung Gwanno Mask Drama, which has been performed at the Gangneung Danoje Festival at the beginning of May. At the opening of the drama, two Jangjamaris enter the stage, tidying it up and chasing other performers out of it. This action symbolizes the purification of the stage. Next, they move in opposite directions and circle halfway around the stage, jumping vigorously. As they meet again at the center of the stage, they hit their bulging bellies against each other's several times. When one falls on its back, it is mounted by the other Jangjamari. This performance suggests sexual activity.

Energetic movements of Jangjamari are designed to exorcise evil spirits and boost the village's vitality. Meanwhile, the crops and *malchi* seaweed attached to the costume of Jangjamari, the big belly (which symbolizes pregnancy and thus abundance), and the sexual movements reflect the Danoje Festival's purpose: to pray for a bountiful harvest of crops and fish (Photo2).

### (3) Sisiddagddagi

Sisiddagddagis appear in the Gangneung Gwanno Mask Drama. Their masks are white, with dots and lines painted in various colors, and have fierce countenances. They wear loose black robes, which are made of hemp and have wide sleeves. Each Sisiddagddagi holds a red stick (or a sword) in his hand. The horrible masks and the sticks embody the menace that Sisiddagddagis pose.

In the drama, as Yangban (aristocrat) and his bride Somaegakshi enjoy dancing and playing together, two

Sisiddagddagis try to break up the couple. The Sisiddagddagis thrust their right legs forward and stretch out their right arms to wave the sticks as if brandishing swords. Finally, they wrest Somaegakshi from Yangban (Photo 3). Standing in front of Yangban and threatening him with the sticks, they try to keep Somaegakshi away from Yangban. In the end, however, Yangban fends off the Sisiddagddagis and is reunited with his bride.

This story seems to have symbolic significance: the Sisiddagddagis capturing Somaegakshi indicates that she catches a plague; and as Yangban rescues her, she is healed. This parallels the famous Korean myth of Cheoyong, in which Cheoyong, a son of the sea dragon king, saves his human wife, warding off a god of disease who has seduced her.

### 3. Physical techniques displayed by divine characters originating from Narye

Narye is an exorcism ritual originating in China. The first record of the introduction of Narye to Korea is found in a document written in 1040, which was during the reign of King Jeongjong of the Koryo Dynasty (918-1392). Yet, this description only refers to Narye as a royal ritual, and Narye performed in local communities may have been brought to Korea before 1040.

Narye was conducted at the end of the year. At the palace, municipal offices, and local communities, people wore masks, held ritual implements, chanted incantations, and made chasing gestures to expel the evil spirits of the old year. At the end of the Koryo Dynasty, the entertainment part of Narye carried more weight than its exorcism aspects, and people started to call Narye “Naryehi” or “Nahi,” which literally means “Narye performance.” This trend accelerated in the Joseon Dynasty, so much so that people performed Narye as entertainment.

In the Koryo Dynasty, Narye was carried out by 24 Jinja children, 12 Jipsaja house stewards, 22 Goingin (one of whom acted as Pangsangshi, a central figure in expelling evil spirits, and another as a Chansa chanter), and 20 Gogakkun consisting of four people carrying flagpoles, four people playing the *tungso* vertical flute, and 12 people carrying drums. In the ritual, they expelled evil spirits.

In his poem “Kunahaen,” Confucian scholar Lee Saek (1328-1396) portrays the performances after a Narye. They included the Obang Gwi Dance (dance of five demons), the lion dance, fire-breathing, sword-swallowing, acrobatics by tribes of western China, tightrope-walking, the Cheoyong Dance and a mask performance by actors mimicking various animals. Lee’s poem indicates that these performances included appearances by divine characters such as the five demons in the Obang Gwi Dance, the lion in the lion dance, Cheoyong in the Cheoyong Dance, and an old man who spectators thought was the incarnation of the South Star.

The Obang Gwi Dance evolved into the Obang Cheoyong Dance (dance of five Cheoyong) in the Joseon Dynasty and the Obang Sinjang Dance (dance of five Sinjang deities) in today’s mask dramas. (“Obang” means “five directions,” which consist of the four cardinal points of the compass and the center.) The lion dance developed into Bukcheong Saja-nori, which is the lion dance of Bukcheong in South Hamgyong Province, present-day North Korea. Meanwhile, the old man who is the personification of the South Star appears in Bongsan Talchum, the mask drama of Bongsan in Hwanghae Province, present-day North Korea.

In his collection of essays “Yongje Chonghwa,” Seong Hyeong (1439-1504) illustrates how Narye was performed at the palace in the early Joseon period. In some respects, Joseon’s Narye seems to have differed from Narye performed in the imperial court of the Koryo Dynasty. For instance, in addition to Pangsangshi and twelve gods of the Chinese zodiac who appeared in Koryo’s Narye, Joseon’s Narye featured other masked characters such as Pankwan, Chowangshin and Somae. They are regarded as divine beings, as they served to drive off evil spirits. In particular, Somae is the prototype of Somaegakshi in today’s mask dramas.

Some characters who act as vanquishers of evil in extant mask dramas are derived from divine characters in Narye. They include eight Meokjung (apostate monks), Chwibari (drunkard), and Namgang Old Man (the incarnation of the South Star) in Bongsan Talchum, Yeonip and Nunkkumjeoki in Yangju Byeolsandaenori (mask drama of Yangju, a region north of Seoul), and Obang Sinjang in Gasan Ogwangdae (mask drama of Gasan, South Gyeongsang Province). Physical techniques exhibited by these characters reflect the strong influence of Narye: people who performed at Narye created mask dramas, probably adopting Narye’s exorcism features. Narye was held to expel demons who were believed to bring about natural disasters. In contrast, immoral characters representing social evils are defeated in mask dramas. These characters include heretic monks (such as Omjung pockmarked monk, Sangjwa young monk, Meokjung and Nojang old monk) and Yangban aristocrat.

### (1) Obang Sinjang

Obang Sinjang deities appear in Scene 1 of Ogwangdae mask dramas of Jinju, Masan and Gasan, South Gyeongsang Province. In Gasan Ogwangdae, for instance, Obang Sinjang – who consist of the “East Blue General,” “South Red General,” “Center Yellow General,” “West White General” and “North Black General” – dance to chase off evil spirits and purify the stage (Photo4). Each god watches over a direction and wears a mask and costume whose color stands for the direction he protects.

In the Obang Sinjang Dance, two types of rhythms, *hochamban* and *kyopchamban*, are played alternately. When *hochamban* is played, Obang Sinjang flap their arms like cranes three times. They lower their arms at the end of *hochamban*. When *kyopchamban* starts, they move a little faster. They raise their arms above their heads and bend each elbow alternately. Lifting one arm, they raise and lower their right legs in a dignified manner and turn around 360 degrees. As actors faithfully follow the prescribed movements, the Obang Sinjang Dance preserves a stateliness reminiscent of a ritual. Physical techniques employed in this dance are presumably designed to emphasize the holy aspects of Obang Sinjang who exorcise demons.

The Obang Sinjang Dance resembles the Obang Gwi Dance performed in Narye in the late Koryo Period and the Obang Cheoyong Dance performed in Joseon’s Narye. In particular, the functions and characteristics of these dances, as well as the costumes worn by the performers, share many similarities. For example, both the five Sinjang in the Obang Sinjang Dance and the five Cheoyong in the Obang Cheoyong Dance are holy beings who expel malevolent spirits (Photo5).

As mentioned above, Lee Saek writes about the Obang Gwi Dance in “Kunahaen.” Meanwhile, Chinese Narye seems to have featured a similar dance. According to the “Watch Night” chapter of Volume 6 of

“Menglianglu,” a book on Chinese folk customs written around 1270 by author Wu Zimu, various divine characters appeared at Narye, including Wufangguishi, as well as Jiangjun, Fushi, Panguan, Zhong Kui, Liuding, Liuja, Shenbing, Zaojun, Tudi, Menhu and Shenwei. These characters were believed to ward off evil spirits.

## (2) Yeonip and Nunkkumjeoki

Yeonip and Nunkkumjeoki are divine characters in Yangju Byeolsandae-nori and Songpa Sandae-nori (mask dramas of Seoul’s Songpa). People put such a high value on these characters that when a *gosa* (prayer ritual before a drama) is conducted, the masks of Yeonip and Nunkkumjeoki are placed at the center.

Yeonip represents the “killer star of heaven,” and Nunkkumjeoki the “killer star of the earth.” If they scowl at a person, he dies. Thus, when entering the stage, Yeonip covers his face with a fan, and Nunkkumjeoki, who follows Yeonip, hides his face with his black garment. When dancing, Yeonip looks only at the sky, while Nunkkumjeoki looks down at the ground.

In the drama, one by one, Sangjwa young monks dance, approach and peer at Yeonip. As Yeonip reveals his face, the monks run away, frightened (Photo6). Seeing them, Omjung, a monk with a scabby face, bellows, “What on earth did they see? Why did they rush away?” and unveils the face of Nunkkumjeoki. As Nunkkumjeoki blinks, Omjung bolts. The mask of Nunkkumjeoki has metal parts, so its eyes open and shut (Photo7).

In Yangju Byeolsandae-nori, Sangjwa and Omjung are portrayed as wicked. In particular, since Omjung is afflicted with an itch (or smallpox), he is regarded as an evil spirit. Meanwhile, Nunkkumjeoki, who scares off Omjung, parallels Pangsangshi in Narye, who casts out demons. The blinking eyes of Nunkkumjeoki have the same function as the four golden eyes of the Pangsangshi mask: they serve to scare away malevolent spirits.

## (3) Namgang Old Man

In Scene 6 of Bongsan Talchum, the elderly couple Yeonggam and Miyal-halmi, who have been torn asunder by war, meet each other after a long time. Yet, they start quarrelling when Yeonggam’s mistress appears. Kicked by Yeonggam, Miyal-halmi dies. Then, Namgang Old Man enters the stage and prays for her departed soul, chanting and beating a drum. After the prayer, he says, “Children, wake up. Look at the east and south windows. The sun has risen.”

Namgang Old Man is also called Namkeuk (“South Pole”) Old Man. He has a noble appearance, with his face and beard colored white (Photo8). He is slightly bent with age and holds a pipe in his hand. He is placid, and moves and speaks slowly. His shamanistic song in the drama highlights his role as a holy being who determines the length of man’s life. His words after the prayer serve as a divine message heralding the dawn of a new epoch.

The prototype of Namgang Old Man seems to have already existed at the end of the Koryo Period. Lee Saek’s “Kunahaen” says, “Among the performers is an old man, stooped yet tall. Amazed at him, people say he

is the South Star.” Although this description is too simple to know what kind of performance he presented, it seems that his appearance and performance bore ethereal facets.

#### (4) Chwibari

Chwibari, a drunk monk, is a masked divine character in Yangju Byeolsandae-nori, Songpa Sandae-nori, and Talchum mask dramas of Bongsan, Gangyeong and Eunnyul in Hwanghae Province, present-day North Korea. The relationship between Chwibari and Nojang (old monk) strongly resembles that between the exorcist and demons in Narye. Painted black, the mask of Nojang looks surly and heinous.

In Bongsan Talchum, when Nojang conceals himself, standing on the stage, Meokjung monks start talking with each other, comparing Nojang to black and ominous things such as an overcast sky, ceramics carried by a peddler, charcoal and a python. This conversation implies that Nojang is a social evil that must be gotten rid of.

Later in the drama, Chwibari circles around Nojang and his lover Somu (young woman) and threatens him, uttering blistering words and brandishing a willow branch. Chwibari walks with long strides, jumps and dances briskly. These movements embody his vigor.

The mask of Chwibari is painted red, as he is drunk. When he appears on stage, he holds a willow branch up above his head. His appearance shows similarities to what Lee Saek wrote in “Kunahaen”: “Gems adorn Shilla’s Cheoyong dancers/Exuding a heady fragrance, dew drops from the flower branches gracing their hair/The dancers stage the Taepyeongmu dance, waving their long sleeves/With their faces rosy, they never sober up.”

Red is thought to have the power to expel demons. In the late Koryo Period, Cheoyong wore a red mask in Narye. A peach branch was fixed to his head, as it was believed to ward off evil spirits. Similarly, Chwibari wears a red mask, holds a leafy branch (another tool of exorcism), and subjugates Nojang, who represents a social nuisance. A bell is attached to Chwibari’s leg, probably because its tinkling sound frightens away evil spirits (Photo9).

#### (5) Meokjung

Meokjung, a heretical monk, is a masked divine character in Yangju Byeolsandae-nori, Songpa Sandae-nori, Bongsan Talchum, Gangyeong Talchum and Eunnyul Talchum. Meokjung preserves traces of his divine functions, although he is a worldly person with respect to his identity, character, and appearance.

The mask of Meokjung in Bongsan Talchum is very different from those of other characters: it looks like the face of a demon (Photo10).

The Eight Meokjung Dance in Bongsan Talchum retains the exorcism aspects of Narye. Eight Meokjung monks appear on stage one by one. As one Meokjung enters the stage, he slaps his *hansam* cloth on the face of another Meokjung who has been on the stage, and chases him off. In olden times, a peach or willow branch was used instead of *hansam*.

Meokjung is an apostate monk and thus a social nuisance. He wears a demon mask and is driven out with a

peach or willow branch (which is a symbol of exorcism, as mentioned above). A Meokjung – that is, a social evil – driven out by another Meokjung seems to symbolize that a demon – or, tragedies inflicted by nature – is gotten rid of (Photo11). Thus, the later a Meokjung appears on stage, the stronger his divine power. Meanwhile, the Meokjung who appears on stage first and thus has no one to chase off has a bell attached to his leg, as its tinkling sound wards off evil spirits (Photo12).

The Eight Meokjung Dance clearly shows the influence of Narye: when people conducted Narye at the palace or in local communities, they used peach branches to expel evil spirits.

#### 4 . Conclusion

The divine characters in Korean mask dramas have their roots in either traditional rites or Narye. Their origin is closely intertwined with their physical techniques. Narye reflects man's struggle against nature and aims to avert natural mishaps – or, natural evils. In contrast, mask dramas, in which Narye's exorcism techniques are employed, focuses on conflicts between people – or, social evils.

Masked divine characters are classified into two groups. The first is those who mostly retain their divine facets with respect to identity, character, appearance and function. This category embraces Kakshi in Hahoe Pyolshin-gut T'al-nori, Jangjamari and Sisiddagddagi in the Gangneung Gwanno Mask Drama, Namgang Old Man in Bongsan Talchum, and Yeonip and Nunkkumjeoki in Yangju Byeolsandae-nori. The second group is made up of those who preserve vestiges of their divine functions although their identity, character and appearance no longer carry holy aspects. This group includes Chwibari and eight Meokjung in Byeolsandae-nori and Haeseo Talchum.

Among intriguing characters is Somu, who appears in various extant mask dramas. Her prototype is Somae, the sister of Zhong Kui. Like Zhong Kui, who was a main character in vanquishing demons in Narye, she was a divine character in the exorcism ritual. In mask dramas, however, she is merely an entertainer, with her sanctity lost completely.