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Spirit Possession in Korean Shaman rituals of the Hwanghaedo-Tradition

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The Cartesian view of the world influenced anthropological studies of ritual and spirituality. Spirit possession studies in particular suffer from this Western idiosyncrasy, because many anthropologists who write about possession argue that possession cults and rituals are “just” traditional performances for treating psychosomatic illness brought about by disharmonies in the social order. A spiritual reality, as perceived by the participants of religious rituals and shamans is in principle excluded. This reduction of the psycho-social aspects of spirit possession ignores a “transcendent reality,” where physical and spiritual experiences can be an expression of individual and culturally specific reality. In this article, I analyse the various anthropological perspectives on spirit possession and compare the epistemological approaches on “ritual reality” with the indigenous terminology for states of possession of Korean Hwanghaedo-shamans from Seoul. The Hwanghaedo tradition of Korean shaman is particularly ecstatic and moments of spirit possession exist in many variations. For this reason, the analysis is focused on this tradition.

Keywords: Korean Shamanism, spirit possession, incorporation, ritual, social anthropology

1. Introduction

In the polyphony of conflicting, intersecting, and overlapping discourses about spirit possession where the participants use their favourite terms in accordance with their respective academic perspective, there are many different definitions of spirit possession, influenced both by *Zeitgeist* and teleological orientation. Each of them focuses on different elements of the complex phenomenon.

This article analyses the various anthropological perspectives on spirit possession and compares the epistemological approaches on “ritual reality” with the indigenous terminology for states of individual possession. The individual experience of liminal moments discussed here includes trance, ecstasy or incorporation by gods, spirits or ancestors of Korean Hwanghaedo-shamans.¹ Particular emphasis is placed on the

¹ Hwanghaedo is the name of a North Korean province. Due to the Korean War (1950-

spiritual experience of the shamans themselves, whose perspectives on spirit possession are rarely discussed in depth in the existing literature.²

In 1921, Traugott Konstantin Oesterreich, a German philosopher of religion, documented that in most cultures people have attributed bad, harmful, and fateful events such as illnesses and accidents to the work of evil spirits for many centuries in his great work "Die Besessenheit". The existence of these demonic beings as they are understood in the Christian context served as a justification of suddenly occurring and often dramatically progressing mental disorders in a pre-scientific world.

The idea of possession by spiritual entities by no means disappeared with the rationality of modernity. Even in modern research directions such as transpersonal psychology, the concept of possession is accepted and is not dismissed as superstition. Using Oesterreich's concept over half a century later, transcultural psychologist Wolfgang Pfeiffer proved in his research that spirit possession is based on the culturally accepted ideas of those affected. In many of these, the explanation of those affected was that a spiritual power took possession of them (Pfeiffer 1994, p. 143). Accordingly, supernatural causes might cause mental disorders.

Other psychologists formulated their theses in a less transcendent way, describing spirit possession as the result of illness and emotional stress, which among other things was repeatedly linked to unsettling social changes in modern times.

This idea is not new from an anthropological perspective, since a relationship between culture-related social stress and possession as an expression of negative feelings and protest against socio-cultural norms is considered proven by many authors (Geertz 1960, Stange 1979, Hoare 2004, Hayes 2006). In contrast to the psychological approaches, ethnological research remains more open to interpretation when it comes to the topic of spirituality. The indigenous experience of spirit possession is easily lost and disregarded in psychological discourses that are not generally based on experience and researchers are, as a result, pathologizing the culturally "other", because the exceptional transpersonal altered state of consciousness is an experience Western civilization is no longer familiar with (Scharfetter 1997, p. 84).

1953) and the ensuing religiously hostile policies of the North Korean government, the shamans were forced to flee to South Korea. Many of the shamans used the sea route to flee and landed in the port city of Incheon. To this day, shaman rituals of the Hwanghaedo tradition can be observed mainly in Incheon and Seoul, though Hwanghaedo shamans can still be found nationwide. The Hwanghaedo tradition replaced the customs of the Gyeonggido hereditary shamans after the Korean War. In Seoul, the Hwanghaedo shamans established themselves alongside the traditional, urban Hanyang shamanism, whose ritual practice is strongly interwoven with the courtly traditions of the Joseon dynasty.

² Even in Korean studies on Korean shamanism there is very little research on altered states of consciousness or spirituality of Korean shamans.

Under the pathological points of view, psychological analysis draws parallels to western psychological concepts of hysteria (Cortes & Gatti 1984, Mattoo et. al. 2002, Sethi & Bargava 2009), dissociative identity disorder (DID) (Bulatao 1982, Castillo 1994a, 1994b, Freeman et al. 1999, Mayaram, et al.1999), or "neurotic" defense strategies (Carrin 1999, Suwanlert 1976).

2. Spirit possession

Although there is a clear awareness that ritual spirit possession in a cultural context should not be evaluated as a disease and renowned psychologists explicitly refer to this fact, the World Health Organisation included "trance and possession disorders" under the code F44.3 in the 10th version of its "International Classification of Mental Disorders" in 1991.

For the American anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano, spirit possession phenomena, i.e. all altered states of consciousness due to spiritual foreign influence, are in response to complex psychosocial problems. He refers to a problematic perspective shift that is fundamentally inherent in the Western psychological interpretation patterns of spirit possession due to their focus on the "inside" (Crapanzano 1977, p. 14). These psychological explanations are within the Cartesian determination principle of inside and outside, which does not necessarily converge with the mentality of other cultures. Psychologists see spirit possession as a "projection" of repressed inner feelings or conflict with another person or entity, while in the indigenous sense it is perceived as incorporation (Strecker 2000, p. 56). Because of this, they deny the spiritual experience of those affected and ignore the ideological core of the transcendent experience in their discourse.

In contrast, the cultural-semiotic approach of anthropologist Michael Lambek describes possession as a communication system in which positive and negative social, cultural, and historical contexts are reflected. Unlike Crapanzano, who sees altered states of consciousness at the center of analysis, trance is only of secondary importance for Lambek. He sees trance as an expression of a variety of the rarely explored psychophysiological states of exceptional circumstances in various aspects of human existence and thus, as difficult to understand in ethnographic terms (Lambek 1981, p. 53, pp. 55-56).

Other academic definitions focus on the effects of spirit possession with regards to the ability of the people concerned to act in a self-determined way. The New Zealand anthropologist Raymond Firth divided spirit possession into the categories of spirit mediumship, spirit possession, and shamanism (Firth 1967, p. 296). Under spirit possession, he subsumed the phenomenon of deviant behavior. This is seen as a sign by other members of society that the person is controlled by a spiritual entity. In spirit

mediumship, the possessed person is able to communicate with beings of the other world. The defining characteristic of this communication is that the people involved understand what is said and are able to interpret the messages. In Firth's categorization, the term "shamanism" focuses on phenomena in which a person has control over the spirits. The capability to control spiritual entities is applied in a socially acceptable manner. Similar thoughts, approaches, and terminologies are also the distinctions in „kunstmäßig gewollte Besessenheit“ and „spontane Besessenheit“ as defined by Oesterreich (Oesterreich 1921, p. 129, p. 231), or "positive (voluntary)" and "negative (involuntary) spirit possession" from Bourguignon (Bourguignon 1976, p. 98).

The psycho-ethnologist Colleen Ward also regarded spirit possession from the perspective of the capacity to act, but as opposed to Firth, she focused more on socio-cultural aspects (Ward 1980, p. 155). She distinguishes between central or ritual possession and peripheral possession. Ritual possession is part of the spiritual performance at public ceremonies. The state of possession is usually reversible and of short duration. Spirit possession is classified by cultural beliefs as "normal" when it is embedded in a ritual context of the relevant culture. Outside this context, it is considered as a disease. Ritual possession is a socially accepted possibility for some cultures to handle stressful situations that are different from what they are used to. In contrast, peripheral possession is possession rated as negative within the given culture. This state is not deliberately brought about by the person concerned, and has a much longer duration than Ritual possession. Peripheral spirit possession is seen as a disease and must be treated and cured accordingly. Ward interpreted peripheral possession as an individual's pathological response to stress situations and as an indirect social protest by marginalized members of a society. In summary, she identified two types of possession that are applicable to all cultures practicing rituals of spirit possession: the spontaneous spirit possession, which can take place during and out of rituals, and the induced spirit possession which only occurs during rituals (Büttner 2001, p. 61).

Ward's differentiation between ritual and peripheral possession is, in sociological aspects, strongly influenced by the functionalist theory of British social anthropologist I.M. Lewis. Lewis's studies on this subject have greatly impacted many sociological and anthropological analyses in the field and still do to this day. During his studies on Somalian pastoralists in the Horn of Africa, Lewis observed that spirit possession disorders occurred most frequently in certain social groups. In his "epidemiology of possession," (Lewis 1966, p. 308) he makes the assertion that the individuals of those special groups, primarily composed of women with subordinate or marginal social positions and mentally disturbed men, are particularly susceptible to possession disorders (Lewis 1966, p. 315). Based on this premise from his epidemiological approach, he aimed to better understand the social implications of spirit possession. Lewis was less interested in the psychological and expressive aspects of possession, but rather more curious about the social conditions that were the breeding grounds for

the emergence and development of possession cults. His epidemiology of possession is, therefore, a comparative attempt to isolate the social and cultural conditions present in different societies and that lead particular women and weak men to develop a predisposition for spirit possession.

Lewis concludes from his research that possession cults are "religions of the oppressed" (Lewis 1971, p. 127). Based on the close relationship between oppression and spirit possession, he developed the famous theorem of peripheral possession cults (marginal cults), which oppose the central possession religions (central cults). According to Lewis, the central cult is the moralizing instrument of the religious elites. Priests or shamans are chosen by deities or ancestral spirits and are consequently, thanks to this contact with supernatural powers, empowered to constitute public morals. They decide what is right or wrong as well as the reward and punishment system for these deeds (Lewis 1971, p. 29, pp.134-135). In the peripheral possession cults, people with socially lower status usually organize themselves. The spiritual entities that appear during a possession are amoral and secondary, i.e. they are not relevant to public morality and their origin is often located outside of the dominant society. It is characteristic for peripheral possession to at first manifest itself as a disease, wherein a cure can often only be achieved if the person concerned is taken in by the cult community. The spirit will not be exorcised by the community, but rather tamed and domesticated (Lewis 1989, pp. 26-28). Peripheral possession cults are an expression of resistance against the politically powerful representative of a society in which the superiority of the dominant group or class is not really questioned.

Although it seems that the sociologically oriented explanations of many ethnologists and social anthropologists touch the core of the issue, the danger remains that too narrow a sociological approach often leads to a reductionist perception of these transcendent phenomenon. This can be demonstrated on the basis of Lewis's thesis, which almost exclusively evaluates possession as a protest behavior on the part of the underprivileged

3. Korean shamanism and spirit possession

Different intensities of spirit possession during rituals can be observed within Korean shamanism³. For a description of these various forms of spirit possession or incorporation, I refer to the categorization of the Finnish anthropologist Anna-Leena Siikala, who characterizes possession as follows (Siikala 1992, p.35-36):

role identification:

³ Shamans in Korea are mostly women (80%-90%). For this reason, I will use the female term "*mudang*" throughout the article.

The shaman identifies completely with the role of the incorporated spirit and is perceived by those present at the ritual as a spiritual entity. This form of complete incorporation is particularly widespread in Central and Eastern Siberia.⁴ In Korean shamanism, complete incorporation is the most common manifestation of spirit possession.

dual role:

The shaman acts in a dialogue, where multiple views on a problem can be presented from the shaman, the spirits, gods, or ancestors. It is assumed that the spiritual entity is outside the body of the shaman. This separation of the shaman and the spiritual entity can be observed only occasionally. Usually these scenes occur when the Korean shaman (*mudang*)⁵ deals with minor spirits and wants to expel these from the ritual place. Often, auxiliary shamans and the main shaman interact in a dialogue as a spiritual being and "translator", so that a "role allocation" is recognized. It is however assumed that the shaman who performs a sequence of the ritual is completely incorporated. In this respect, this description does not meet the nature of incorporation in Korean shaman rituals.

counter role:

The shaman interacts with transcendent beings. The dialogue with the spirits is only perceptible to the shaman. Throughout Korean shaman rituals (*gut* / 굿) there are always divination situations where the will of the gods is interpreted. I had the impression at some rituals that in these divination situations, there is a kind of inner dialogue between *mudang* and gods, especially when the interpretation of the transcendent message was not clear or was in doubt. Otherwise, this type of spiritual possession plays only a minor role during Korean shaman rituals.

The term "role" that is used in this context by Siikala seems improper to me because it suggests that the ritual is "just" a spectacle or performance in which the shaman

⁴ Variations of this kind of spirit possession were described by the following authors: Shamans of the Yukaghirs (Jochelson 1926, pp. 196-199), Shamans of the Ewenks (Anisimov 1963, pp. 100-105), Shamans der Yakuts (Hudyakov 1969, pp. 311-355) Manchu shamans (Shirokogoroff 1935, pp. 308-309, pp. 313-314), shamans of the Nanai (Lopatin 1960, pp. 169-172) and Orochi shamans (Lopatin 1946-1949, pp. 365-368). (quoted from Siikala 1989, p. 35.)

⁵ *Mudang* (Korean female shaman), the term most commonly used nowadays to refer to Korean Shamans, and has a pejorative connotation and is therefore associated with a certain disdain. At the same time, it has been observed with the new self-confidence of Korean shamans in recent years that the term *mudang* is again used consciously to quell public stigma and to give the "label" a more objective, job-related character.

plays a role. This unfortunate choice of word reinforces the contradiction between spirituality and spectacle that insinuates a hint of fraud or quackery, and subliminally - though often sociologically or psychologically justified -- creates doubts about spirit possession as a transcendental phenomenon.

Spirit mediums, shamans, and healers of possession trance cults such as the dancers of Theyyam in South India, the mediums and the worshippers of the *Đạo Mau* in Vietnam, the participants of Rangda/Barong ceremonies in Bali, the shamans of the Buryats in Siberia and Mongolia, the shamans of Tamang in Nepal, the shamans of the Orochon and the Daur from China, the Yuta shamans of the Amani archipelago in Japan, or the mediums of the Nat rituals in Myanmar (to name just a few examples from Asia) usually have no doubt that other spiritual specialists of their culture are possessed. If the phenomenon of spirit possession was just acting, it stands to reason that sequences of altered states of consciousness claiming spiritual messages from the gods would be unmasked as lies or fraud. A fraud that has been practiced for hundreds of years, taught, and passed on? Is it really likely that so many generations would preserve and maintain a religious tradition that they consider to be meaningless, ineffective, and fruitless?

Ritual or religious possession and incorporation are characterised by the conviction of the affected individual to be "the other" during the transcendent contact. The continuity of the self-experience is interrupted by an alien consciousness.

It is just as important that the supporters of a Korean shaman perceive her behaviour as the result of the interaction with a different and transcendent personality and therefore interpret the spiritual performance of a *mudang* as actions of an incorporated entity. The messages delivered during spirit possession in the form of divination or "words of gods" (*gongsu* / 공수)⁶ such as solutions for business problems, instructions for healing a sick person, support in the endless search for personal happiness, or other advice for everyday life can only be perceived as true under the premise that spiritual possession is an experienceable reality. This belief in the authenticity of the transcendent revelation is the foundation of Korean shamanism religion and an existential part of its world view. If the messages of the spirit mediums, shamans, and healers are not questioned in possession trance cults, it seems reasonable to suppose

⁶ In contrast to all other religious specialists in Korea, it is only possible for the *mudang* to create a contact between this world (*ieseung* / 이승) and the other world (*jeoseung* / 저승). Only the *mudang* can culminate in the course of a shamanic ritual the incorporation of a spiritual entity into a dialogue. Divination elements have just a confirmatory character and symbolize the satisfaction or benevolence of the gods, spirits and ancestors during the ritual, meanwhile *gongsu* is perceived as the direct message of the gods. Through *gongsu* the spiritual presence is experienced intensely and as a consequence thereof the belief in the veracity of the statements increases. For the customers *gongsu* is the most significant and hence most critical moment of the ritual.

that the altered state of consciousness in which the answers to problems of the community or members of this community are obtained must be authentic. In this sense, the experience of possession and incorporation is for the shaman and for the attendant(s) a real and intense cultural act of faith. From an emic perspective, spirit possession is classified as a normal ritual behaviour. However, there is an awareness that ritual behaviour could only be feigned. The participants of a ritual observe the moments of altered states of consciousness very closely and assess the quality of a *mudang* based not only on the results of a ritual, but also on her ability to amuse gods, spirits, and ancestors and to receive messages from the other world that “make sense” in moments of incorporation.

It is observed that when preparing for an initiation ritual (*naerimgut*), the spiritual mother controls her new initiate quite severely. There is not necessarily insinuation that the new shaman means to cheat by feigning the physical entrance of a spiritual entity, but the course of the ritual is still observed argus-eyed to prevent fraud, and more importantly, to avoid "deception" and "misinformation" by lower spirits. Young and lesser-known shamans are particularly aware of the surveillance by those present at their rituals, insuring that no one dares to simply play at spirit possession. As with all matters of faith, there is no definitive, concrete evidence because the transcendent escapes possibilities for verifiability. However, as observers of shamanic or religious rituals, we should provide a leap of faith, which we often concede in situations during our daily lives. Of course, we cannot prove that possessed or incorporated individuals undergo those conditions of an altered state of consciousness or experience spiritual contact, but we can just a little prove that they do not. In "everyday" situations, people believe that others are pleased by gifts they receive, or that they can become annoyed when losing a game of chess against another person. The truthfulness of their emotions is verified when they say "I am happy" or "I am angry". Where is the difference between these examples and the statements of a possessed person (Büttner 2001, p.21)? Spirit possession can be made perceptible through words, gestures, facial expressions, and illustrations. Generally, the perception of myth and religion is heavily based on narrative attempts or dramatic presentations to come closer to the divine.

In light of this knowledge, it makes sense to refer to the semiotic theory of “the sign” of Ferdinand de Saussure, who defined a sign as being made up of the matched pair of “signifier” and “signified”. The signified is the concept, the meaning, the thing indicated by the signifier. The signified does not need not be a real object, but it is some referent to which the signifier refers. The thing signified is created within the perceiver and it is internal for him; no one else can discern exactly what it means to any given perceiver. When we share concepts, we do so via signifiers.

Transferred to spiritual or religious phenomena, the sign itself can already be understood as a model of the Holy because it creates a relationship with the “absent other”. The “distance” is overcome by the transcendence of the sign.

The problem of understanding spirit possession has its origins in the paradoxical, unresolvable contradictions that arise from familiar dichotomies between self and non-self, between identity and otherness, reality and illusion, body and spirit, rationality and irrationality (Lambek 1989, p.52). William James, the "Father of American psychology", thematised the discomfort in attempting to define "the religious" - and in this context I would classify spirit possession -, which he had already implied in his famous work "The Varieties of Religious Experience" in 1902. He writes:

“(...) the truth must at last be confronted that we are dealing with a field of experience where there is not a single conception that can be sharply drawn. The pretension, under such conditions, to be rigorously ‘scientific’ or ‘exact’ in our terms would only stamp us as lacking in understanding of our task. Things are more or less divine, states of mind are more or less religious, reactions are more or less total, but the boundaries are always misty, and it is everywhere a question of amount and degree”.
(James 1997 (1902), pp. 41-42)

Spirit Possession as mystical-religious experience is certainly embedded in a sociocultural context, and psychological components also play an essential role in possession rituals, but if we want to approach the essence of the phenomenon from an emic perspective it is of particular importance that those affected speak for themselves and describe their experiences if we want the insights to be of any significance. This does not mean that the analytical value of the mentioned classifications should be denied, but it illustrates that the conceptual rigidity of those analyses stand in sharp contrast to the lived and experienced spiritual experience of possession. This subject specific, academic stiffness restricts the scope and flexibility of interpretations (Crapanzano 1977, pp. 9-10.).

4. Mudang and incorporation

As we already know, there are a variety of cultures where possession cults are practiced. Yet the ideas of spirit possession vary considerably. In Korean shamanism it is for example assumed that gods, spirits, or ancestors enter the body of the shaman. This form of "ritual possession" will therefore hereinafter be referred to as "incorporation," in order to capture the physical idea of this entering. Korean shamans have diverse and very specific terminologies to describe the particularities of incorporation and are therefore able to differentiate between spirit possession and unintentional spirit contact.

Sinnaerim (신내림) is the term for the deliberate incorporation of gods, which takes place at initiation rituals (*naerimgut* / 내림굿) and happens during a rather controlled state of consciousness. Particularly in relation to young shamans, this term is often used to emphasize the ability acquired via apprenticeship to control the gods, spirits,

and ancestors. The word *gangsinsin* (강신) ⁷ emphasises the power to summon and to incorporate gods, spirits, or ancestors via rituals, ceremonies, and prayer. The shamanic concept *jeopsinsin* (접신) on the other hand refers to the moment of incorporation in which the *mudang* comes into direct contact with a ghost, or the phase of incorporation when both souls are contained in the body of the shaman.

In Korean shamanism, the idea of spirit possession as opposed to incorporation is more comparable with the concept of the Korean shamanic spirit sickness (*sinbyeong* / 신병) or spiritual illnesses (*singamul* / 신가물). Neither phenomena take place in a ritual context. *Singamul* is an unintentional contact with lower spirits who make the affected person's life difficult. This disturbing phenomenon is usually a suddenly occurring event that may continue for a while, and is often associated with a relatively concrete experience. This spiritual contact is not to be confused with *sinbyeong*, the shamanic spirit sickness, because the contact with lower spirits does not lead to a *naerimgut* but to a *nullimgut* (놀림굿), which will be held in order to suppress this spirit contact or expel the ghosts. In modernity, however, many *nullimgut* are sold by business-minded Korean shamans as *naerimgut*, what is well received, especially among foreigners, since the initiation process to become a shaman is perceived less as a misfortune, but rather as a "consecration". ⁸

Unintended spirit contact is colloquially referred to as *bingui* (병의). *Bingui* is not typical for the transcendent contact experienced at shaman rituals, but describes the striking change in the behavior of a person. The deviant conduct whose origin appears inexplicable is displaced because of the obscurity in the spheres of the spiritual world. In contrast to *bingui* is *sinbyeong*, a process that includes various stages of development before the possession. The manifestations of this process can vary considerably and do not necessarily have to be associated with the idea that the "intrusion into the body" inevitably leads to the incorporation of a transcendent entity. No matter how much we know or read about spirit possession, it remains only an academic perspective, which is missing the experience and the implicit knowledge that often eludes the scientific, linguistic expression. A truth in the classical, epistemological sense based on the Aristotelian notions of *epistēmē* (within the meaning of scientific knowledge) rather than the philosophical *doxa* (within the meaning of opinion, belief) of Parmenides does not exist.

⁷ Shamans, which are incorporated by spirits, are called *gangsinsimu* (강신무). *Gangsinsimu* experience the Korean shamanic spirit sickness *sinbyeong* prior to their initiation. *Gangsinsimu* learn how to handle moments of trance and ecstasy under the guidance of older and more experienced shamans or a spiritual shaman mother during their apprenticeship, which leads to a more or less controlled incorporation by gods, spirits, or ancestors.

⁸ Famous shamans offer abbreviated "initiation rituals" that sometimes take only a few hours for the equivalent of 5,000-10,000 Euros.

This discrepancy between knowledge and experience can only be bridged if we give both forms of knowledge equal voice in the discussions on spirit possession and/or altered states of consciousness. With this in mind, scientists should take a step back from time to time to allow room for the subjective perceptions, descriptions, and reports of affected people. Notions such as embodiment, spirit possession, and incorporation should not be the panacea for explaining why and how people actually experience altered states of consciousness and/or spirit contact, but the starting point for new inquiries in this fascinating domain. From a methodological point of view, it therefore seems to me important to give more space to the experiences and self-perceptions of Korean shamans and the ritual participants in the description and analysis of rituals and to conduct long-term fieldwork in which the most diverse variations and forms of expression of spirit possession can be recorded and compared.

4.1. Incorporation of gods (description by *mudang* Oh Su Ja)

“Already during the ushering song⁹, the gods start to pass in front of my inner eye. If I sing, for example, the *manse baji* at a *sancheon geori* (산천 거리)¹⁰ I imagine the scenery and the mountains that I know. In my mind, I walk through the landscape being sung about. I start dreaming while singing. And then I suddenly notice that something is not right or appears differently. This feels as if a movement is interrupted. Suddenly, the inner flow of images stops. I try to realize the change and to understand the meaning of this sign. The gods reveal something to me and want to transmit something. The auguries, impressions, and symbols condense during the chanting and then all at once, *gongsu* comes through. For this experience of spirit contact, a shaman must be sensitised. I am seeking constantly for contact with my gods, over and over, again and again. I listen to myself, trying to understand my emotional impulses and feel the intuitions that go along with this search. If, for example, I look at the bowl with water on my *sindang* (신당)¹¹ and I have the impression that the water is “disquiet”, then I’m searching for an explanation. I do not even know why water should be restless, but there is something that is conveyed by the water. Then I ask the gods for help, looking for clues to find the answer.

Gods are like air or water. You cannot touch or hold them. As a young shaman, you are very often unexperienced and unfocused. By unfocused, I do not mean that these young shamans act carelessly. It is more likely that they still think of many other things. When they sing *manse baji*, many still have to focus on the text or even have to read it from a paper. There's no room for dreams while reading. Only with time and experience, they internalize singing, dancing, and the many details that must be learned for a ritual. Only then will the ability to understand the gods properly mature.

⁹ Chant called *manse baji* (만세 받이) at the beginning of every *geori*, with which the gods are invited to join the ritual (see photo 1).

¹⁰ Chant for the various mountain spirits (mountain gods) and the gods of the rivers.

¹¹ The private shrine of a shaman.

4.2 Incorporation of spirits of the dead (description by *mudang* Oh Su Ja)

The periods of incorporation during *jinjinogigut* (진진 오귀) are very intense. They are often accompanied by a sense of fear. The deceased fears the passage into the beyond. I feel these emotions most intensely at the moment of *gilgareugi* (길 가르기)¹². Sometimes I have the impression of entering a tunnel and at the end of the tunnel, I see a small light. The light attracts me, and I have the impression of being sucked in. This ritual section is accompanied by strong emotions of fear and anger. Occasionally, I also feel a burning sensation on the skin, when the deceased was cremated. Since I was already very ill myself and was confronted with dread, this feeling is not alien to me. I then told myself repeatedly that I want to live. And I live. I believe that I am protected by my gods, as long as I am faithful to them.¹³

4.3. Incorporation of a spiritual general at the moment of *jakdu dancing*¹⁴ (description by *mudang* Lee Myeong Cha)

While dancing on the *jakdu*, I feel strong and wild. The *Janggun*¹⁵ feels very masculine. Sometimes I have the feeling that it should spray fire out of my eyes, like in a comic strip. My head is hot and an indescribable power runs through my body.

I am sometimes a little afraid before the *jadu geori*. But during the *jakdu geori*, when I slowly feel the power that is in me, I want to let off steam¹⁶. When I finally stand on the knife, the other people seem far away. I stand on a high tower or on the top of a mountain. I want to scream and laugh and dance. The more I dance on the knife, the stronger I feel. It's a wonderful feeling. Sometimes I get the impression that a whole army is standing behind me and cheering. I have a feeling of power. I don't experience this feeling of power with other gods.

4.4. photography of spirit contact and/or moments of incorporation

¹² A *geori* during a death ritual in which, by the tearing of a linen, the bridge between here and beyond is symbolized, and the deceased is seen off (see photo 4).

¹³ Interview with *mudang* Oh, Su Ja on 15/11/2015 and on 18/05/2016 after a *jaesugut* and after a *jinjinogigut* (translation by Jung-a Jung)

¹⁴ *Jakdu* is a sharp blade (or blades) of the traditional straw cutter, on which a shaman performs the blade *dance* to demonstrate her spiritual powers

¹⁵ *Janggun* is a military commander or general

¹⁶ See photo 5 for an impression of *mudang* Lee Myeong Cha in ecstasy (just minutes before she dances on the *jakdu*)



photo 1: *Manse baji* (만세 받이) at the beginning of a *geori* (*mudang* Han Gong Ju)



photo 2: A moment of incorporation (*mudang* Oh Su Ja)



photo 3: In periods of incorporation the shaman gives advice, shares the emotions of grief and gives comfort. (*mudang* Oh Su Ja)



photo 4: *gilgareugi* (길 가르기) at a *jinjinogigut* (*mudang* Oh Su Ja)



photo 5: ecstasy and trance, a shaman licking a sharp blade before dancing on it
(*mudang* Lee Myeong Cha)



photo 6: a shaman falling in Trance (*mudang* Park Mi Ryeong)

5. Indigene concepts of spirit contact and incorporation

During the periods of incorporation, a *mudang* is perceptibly in an altered state of consciousness and touches the otherworldly reality for the visitors of the ritual. The *mudang* is a hybrid creature for this period of time, balancing between spiritual entity and her own ego. She communicates only secondarily with the ritual participants, despite the fact that her ability to focus on the needs of the client indicates the quality of the *mudang*. Primarily she interacts with and through divine beings and ancestral spirits and is, therefore, the link between the real world and a transcendent dimension. In a process of dialogue, the "non-possessed" are given an insight into this "other reality" and the problems of the clients are considered from a new spiritual perspective and brought into an altered context.

For Korean shamans themselves, altered states of consciousness are not the essence of their rituals. It is therefore not surprising that there are no terms that explicitly describe altered states of consciousness. Korean shamans experience the moment of incorporation not as altered or ecstatic consciousness, but as contact with gods and spirits, as can be seen from the above examples. In this respect, the vocabulary correspondingly reflects this perception. *Sin i olatta* (신이 없다) is a term for the moment when the "spirit is coming down". Interestingly, *sin i olatta* is not exclusively a shamanic ability, but can for example also be experienced by those present during the course of an entertaining section of a ritual called *mugam* (무감)¹⁷. Other appellations for the moment of incorporation are *sillyeongnim deureooda* ("the gods enter" / 신령님 들어오다) or *sillyeongnim naerida* ("the gods coming down" / 신령님 내리다). The term *sillyeongnim naerida* is used particularly at initiation rituals to name the first controlled contact between *neophyte* and her *momju* (무감). Other names used for altered states of consciousness such as trance or ecstasy have different connotations in the Korean language. Two words that are often translated as ecstasy or trance are of religious origin. *Mua* (무아) is actually a Buddhist word meaning "to be without oneself". Today it is used in conjunction with feelings of trance and ecstasy that are experienced, for example, as a listener (or musician) at a rock concert. It describes the feeling of "losing yourself" which some people experience when they "melt with music" they feel is particularly intense. The word *pobyeol* (법열) also derives from Buddhist terminology and defines moments of ecstasy that can be experienced in deep meditation. Most often, the word *dotshi* (도취) is used as a synonym for ecstasy. *Dotshi* refers in part to a state of complete intoxication induced by alcohol or drugs and on the other hand, specifies the feeling of rapture that overwhelms a person when experiencing something particularly beautiful or impressive, such as a fascinating landscape.

¹⁷ Between *geori* a kind of interlude can take place in which visitors and customers of the shaman wear shaman clothes and dance themselves in a trance. Some dancers feel spirit contact. *Mugam* is usually very amusing and cheerful. The dance contributes much to the entertainment and is a ritual element in which one can let off steam.

The anglicism ecstasy (엑스터시) is used exclusively in the context of drug usage. Sexual ecstasy or extreme moments of positive excitement are referred to as *hwanghol* (황홀) or *hwangholkyeong* (황홀경). Although the descriptive phenomenology circumnavigates the linguistic problems, the description of extraordinary experiences remains the only sensible approach that allows a methodical classification of the contents of experience shamans undergo in altered states of consciousness. Therefore, any description of different states of consciousness requires the researcher to clearly define all terminology to illustrate the differences and limitations in comparison to the indigenous terminology.

6. Conclusion

Regarding Korean shamanism, one can roughly distinguish three varieties of spirit contact between the *mudang* and gods, spirits, or ancestors. The *mudang* meets her function as a mediator between the worlds most noticeably when she is incorporated and transmits the will of the spiritual entities directly. This form of transcendent contact with the other world is concrete and perceptible for all those present at the ritual.

In her function as a fortune teller, she interprets the messages of the gods. The contact with the other world is brought about deliberately, but a direct connection is only experienced by the *mudang*. Additionally, divinatory ritual practices repeatedly visualize the approval or disapproval of the gods on the progress of the ritual.

As a last variation of spirit contact, all ritual sequences that serve to feed or supply lower spirits must be considered. The segments of a Korean shaman ritual that take place at the beginning and the end of a *gut* do not aim to ask the spirits for their will. Divination or messages from the other world do not matter. More important is the idea of harmony between the “real” world and the “transcendent” world. Harmony should be maintained in order to avoid dissonance that may pose a threat to the success of a ritual and potentially lead to problems for the participants of the *gut*. The character of this form of spirit contact is not communicative or dialogical, and does not therefore bring further insights. It is more a spiritual, reciprocal trade; a “spiritual duty” to every shamanic ritual in Korea.

A *mudang*'s capacity to embody gods, ancestors, and spiritual entities is fundamental to her claim that she can perform an effective ritual. The genuine belief in the transcendental nature of the *mudangs* experiences forms the structural framework for all rituals (invoking the gods, entertaining the gods, and sending off the gods). This is the basis for the relationship between customers and shamans and is seen as having the power to effect a transformation in the client. In this sense, the genuine belief in the transcendental nature of such experiences as trance, ecstasy, and incorporation is the core of all Hwanghaedo shaman rituals.

As a researcher and observer, it is not always easy to understand how spiritual-religious experiences that do not correspond to our world view are triggered, experienced, and lived. The challenge in the study of spirit possession lies in experimenting with potential articulations between the psychological, biological, and social dimensions of possession phenomena without overlooking the fact that there is a culturally bound, indigenous perspective that perceives spiritual experiences as a reality in their own right.

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