

Weavers of Ritual: How Shamans Achieve Their Aims

Boudewijn Walraven

Applying the rational actor axiom and focusing on ritual practice rather than on idealized or reified traditions, this article attempts to clarify how the clients of Korean shamans who perform rituals in the Hwanghae and Seoul styles derive benefits from the rituals they commission by looking at the “small print” of these rituals and the impact various ritual actions have on the participants. The conventionalized sacred space of the ritual affords an appropriate context in which the details of ritual action may be improvised and personalized in order to satisfy the needs of the clients as much as possible. Attention to these procedures contributes to an understanding of the continued performance of such rituals in the vast urban conglomeration of 21st-century Seoul and its satellite cities.

Keywords: Korean shamans, rituals, religious practice, rational actor theory.

1. Introduction

In their recent book *Acts of Faith*, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke have pointed out that the social sciences generally have assumed that the rational actor axiom (the assumption that human beings on the whole do not act arbitrarily but attempt to achieve goals that seem desirable) cannot be applied to the study of religion, even though it underpins social research in all other areas of human endeavor. They make a strong plea for extending this axiom to the study of religion as well, no longer regarding believers as misguided victims of false consciousness, but as persons making calculated choices aimed to provide

them with maximal returns (either material or spiritual) for their efforts (Stark & Finke 2000:42, 55). Although Stark and Finke largely ignore less organized forms of religion and are apt to take monotheistic religion (in particular, American Christianity in its many guises) as paradigmatic—perhaps the reason why they ignore the work of some anthropologists who have written with considerable empathy about non-western, less organized religions—I sympathize with them inasmuch as they take believers seriously. As Catherine Bell has stated: “The ancient Chinese sage Hsün-tzu [...] reminds us that we will never understand ritual if we are apt to look down on what other people do and view their actions from a position of intellectual or observational superiority” (Bell 1997: xii). If, in the case of the rituals of Korean shamans, one assumes from the outset that they are irrational remnants of traditional culture doomed to disappear when modernity permeates society, there can be no serious search for the rationale of the rituals (nor can one understand why they are still with us in the third millennium).

In this article I will consider the question of how Korean shamans make their rituals meaningful to individual clients, and thereby effective, proceeding from the hypothesis that their clients have good reasons to have such rituals performed. It is based on fieldwork with shamans who perform in the Hwanghae-do and Hanyang (Seoul) styles,¹ and will be concerned with very concrete matters of detail, things that one might regard as the small print of ritual. At the same time, however, it is also a plea for a certain approach to ritual in general.

If participation in religious activities is taken as a rational choice which brings its own rewards, it is important to take a dispassionate look at the nature of these rewards, considering actual practice rather

1. All examples given are from shamanic rituals (*kut*) observed in Seoul or Inch'ŏn, mostly in the period 1999-2000, although there are also references to *kut* I witnessed earlier. For the development of the ideas presented in this article I owe much to long discussions with Antonetta Bruno, who has set forth a similar approach in her fascinating study *The Gate of Words* (Bruno 2001; the commercial edition will be published in 2002 by the CNWS Research School of Leiden University). I also want to thank the shamans who showed me so much kindness during my fieldwork, (in alphabetical order): Cho Man-sun, Chŏng Hak-pong, Chŏng Mun-san, Chŏng Sun-tŏk, Chŏng Yŏng-suk, Kim Chŏng-suk, Kim Ch' un-ok and Kim Ki-ch' an. Fieldwork was made possible by a Korea Foundation Fellowship.

than theology or culturally determined ideals. Thus it may be one of the rewards of church attendance that one maintains social relations with other people and enjoys a sense of community. Yet, practice is not confined to concrete acts. Beliefs, too, may be part of this practice as long as they are actually held by believers and not the dead letter of theological treatises or official dogma. A consistent focus on religious *practice*, if applied to both one's own and other cultures, will diminish the inclination to "Orientalize" other cultures, exorcizing distorted views that are the result of the comparison of theology and theoretical views of religion in one culture with the ritual practices of another. Because in the West "ritual" has often been associated with "the primitive, tribal and non-rational" (Bell 1997: 256), this easily leads to the use of negative labels such as "superstitious" or "magical" (e.g., lacking a true religious dimension). If, however, the actual religious practices of the West, too, are viewed without bias, the picture changes. In fact, religious practice in the West includes many elements that run counter to official church dogmas, which, however, disproportionately determine what nearly everyone believes religion to be. Emphasis on practice will also break through the borderlines between religions and reveal that individuals in their practice move between different forms of religion and actually do many things and think many thoughts that are not prescribed or condoned by the official teachings of the religion they are supposed to belong to.

Seen from the perspective outlined above, it is above all the experience of the believers that deserves to be studied. In studies of the rituals of Korean shamans, however, other concerns often take first place. During a community ritual at the Map'o Pugundang in Seoul held in the first days of the lunar New Year 2000, a Korean professor who was engaged in conversation with some young people sharply criticized foreign scholars who observed a ritual once and then felt confident enough to write about it. He himself, he said, had observed Kim Kūm-hwa, the super-star shaman who is a government designated keeper of certain Hwanghae-do rituals, for twenty years, but would not dare to say that he really *knew* her rituals. I have no difficulty with the notion that solid, protracted fieldwork should be the basis of research of this kind, but do not share the approach to ritual that glimmers through these words. Tacit assumptions behind this statement are 1) that the

person of the shaman should be the focus of research, and 2) that the aim is to get to know, by seeing as many rituals as possible, what a particular shaman's ritual in its totality is like. This again suggests that there is one true and complete form of this ritual, which single instances of it will tend to reflect only imperfectly. In Korean academic practice, this abstraction and reification of ritual often goes together with a strong tendency to be interested in shamanic rituals because they supposedly represent "authentic traditions," that is, because they may be considered part of the cultural heritage of Korea (the reason, of course, why the government has taken measures to protect some of them). Debate whether certain rituals qualify as such are a major academic concern. In a meeting of a Korean association devoted to the study of shamanism (the Musok hakhoe), held in the spring of 2000, in which several younger scholars documented significant changes in the rituals of the mudang, most participants in the discussion lamented these changes and pointed out that no more than a handful of shamans were left who maintained authenticity.

The idea that shamanic rituals are valuable to the degree they maintain old traditions is already found with one of the most illustrious scholars of Korean shamanic rituals, the early twentieth-century folklorist and historian Son Chin-t'ae (1900-1950?). He wanted to use the tradition of shamanic rituals to reconstruct the life of the common people in the past, on the assumption that these rituals were survivals of centuries gone by. In the introduction to shaman songs published in the magazine *Shin kajöng* (The New Family) in 1936 he wrote: "Now we know that what we call *mudang* [shamans] is altogether nothing but superstition, but in the primitive past (*migae-han yennal*) they truly were religious leaders. Therefore they transmitted myths of the creation of the world, made prayers and songs to console the spirits, or created dances and songs that explain the origin of various spirits. Thus they made a great contribution to the literature, the music and the dances of the primitive period (*wonshi shidae*).” That last statement may indeed be true, but a view of "tradition" as unchangeable has become highly problematic now that so many scholars have amply documented the process of continuous construction and re-construction, if not invention and deconstruction, of what people choose to call tradition.

Yet another implied assumption in studies of this kind is that one should investigate not just traditions, but *Korean* traditions. In a paper in which he discusses the pantheon of the shamans, one prominent and very experienced researcher emphasizes that one should never rely on data obtained from one informant to identify the whole Korean pantheon (Yang 1999). As such, one cannot easily deny this. The question, though, is what the significance of identifying the “Korean pantheon” is. Might it not be equally, or more, relevant to understand the pantheon of a single shaman, which would constitute a more organic entity? Is, in other words, shamanic ritual a phenomenon that derives its significance from the fact that it occurs on a national scale and in a national context, or is it important because of what it means in a multitude of individual lives? Of course, these days many shamans themselves like to stress that they are keepers of “Korean intangible cultural treasures” (their rituals), but that should not stop us from asking critical questions about the implications of such a “nationalization” of shamanism. This question is all the more justified because of the great number of private rituals that take place everyday, which receive much less attention than certain show-case rituals “of national importance,” such as the *tano-je kut* in Kangnŏng, which annually is shown (for a few brief moments) on national television, or the Chindo *ssikkim kut*, which is on a shortlist of candidates for designation by UNESCO as part of the Intangible World Heritage.

If the rituals are considered as forms of religious practice, rather than manifestations of Korea’s cultural heritage, the focus shifts. It is no longer the shaman only who is the center of attention. Instead the question is what a specific ritual does for all the different participants (among whom priority should be given to the clients of the shamans, for whom the ritual is performed). What goes on, what is transacted, between the ritual specialists and those for whose benefit the ritual is held? What specific benefits do they receive? Each ritual becomes important for its own sake; no longer is it regarded a more or less imperfect realization of a perfect model of true, authentic tradition. Seen this way, it becomes impossible to describe the form and function of such rituals once and for all. It is not the structure of ritual, but the ritual process that becomes the focus of attention.

With such an approach it becomes irrelevant whether a shaman

represents an authentic tradition. A “good” shaman is no longer someone who faithfully transmits the forms of the past, but a shaman whose ritual is meaningful to the clients (that is, affects the clients) and therefore is effective. Although I will argue that many of the traditional elements of ritual are functional in this sense, one should not immediately conclude that the many practitioners who conduct rituals without, or with very few, traditional paraphernalia, who do not sing the traditional songs, and who use only the simplest kind of musical accompaniment cannot be “good shamans.” One may regret the loss of traditional culture this signifies, but from the point of view of religious practice these shamans need not be inferior to the kind of shamans who receive scholarly attention. Yet, they have almost been completely ignored by researchers. For the light they may shed on the question of what factors actually make a ritual work, even those who are not so effective as shamans deserve to be studied.

That individual rituals are important is not to say, however, that a researcher can observe only one ritual. This would be the same as claiming that to understand one linguistic utterance there is no need to learn the language in which it is spoken. An understanding of the symbolic language of culture is indispensable. But “culture” is not an unchangeable mold or structure that completely determines the meanings of concrete rituals. Instead it serves as a language in which many things may be expressed, or an idiom with the help of which practical realities are addressed. In fact, in a brief article like this it is this language only that can be discussed, and of this no more than some of its “phonemes,” the basic elements that can be used to transmit messages. In the final analysis, however, these messages are what is important. In a concrete situation like that of a ritual, it is to the individual, to the person for whom the ritual is performed, that certain acts become meaningful. Therefore, the specific conditions of each ritual and individual circumstances are crucial, and are more important than the general framework and the general purpose of the ritual, which are privileged in folkloristic accounts of *kut*.

Whereas folklorists or scholars who regard shamanism as the embodiment of Korean traditional culture have tended to concentrate their attention on the various forms of ritual and the actions of the shamans (the different ritual sequences, the costumes worn, the

dances performed, the songs sung, various ritual actions, etc.), anthropologists (e.g., Akiba Takashi in the colonial period and Laurel Kendall in more recent years) have been more interested in the relationship between shamans and clients. While feeling closer to this “anthropological tradition,” I want to look at the way the small details of ritual, which so far have been mostly the domain of the folklorists, contribute to the efficacy of the ritual for the clients. It is my contention that attention to such details helps us to understand the way the rituals work and thus, indirectly, offers an explanation for their continued existence.

2. The clients’ emotional engagement in ritual

Certain students of ritual, of whom Frits Staal is a prominent example, have argued that ritual has no intrinsic meaning, that the details of ritual, the various ritual actions, have no symbolically expressive function and that it even belongs to the very essence of ritual that it has no meaning (Staal 1975). Whatever the truth of this may be for the Vedic rituals with which Staal illustrated his argument, in rituals like the *kut*, in which there is a constant interaction between the performers of the ritual and those for whom the ritual is performed, this is manifestly untrue and all participants are constantly engaged in the creation and transmission of meaning.

Other scholars of ritual, such as Tambiah (1985), have argued that the actual benefits of ritual are not necessarily the aims it ostensibly claims to achieve, and that there are other unspoken yet positive effects which explain why rituals continue to be performed. The kind of transaction one may witness in *kut* may serve as an example of this. A *kut* is a transaction between shamans and clients not only in the sense that the latter pay the former a sum of money to provide certain services. It is also a transaction in the sense that, for a *kut* to be effective, a message should be transmitted from the shamans to the clients, which

2. That in this article I attempt to comprehend what the clients of the *mudang* get out of *kut* by explaining things mainly in psychological terms does not mean that I regard the “spiritual” view of the rituals as false, let alone superstitious. For me personally, however, that aspect of the matter remains outside the field about which I could comment. My aim—as the subtitle of *Acts of Faith* puts it—is “explaining the human side of religion”

results in what I am inclined to regard as a psychological transaction.² The clients should be liberated from worries and given confidence that they are able to face future challenges. This is not only my personal interpretation. For shamans and the clients, too, this is the criterion for a good, effective *kut*, even if the ostensible aim is something less easily achieved: pregnancy, success in business, or the passing of an examination etc. (Bruno 2001:160-161). The term that crops up time and again is *shiwon-hada*, “to feel relieved (from oppression, sorrow, etc.).” For instance, in one of the early parts of a *kut* that was intended to liberate a young boy with apparent psychological problems from troublesome spirits (*a hōju kut*,³ Tobongsan, 14 April 2000), his grandmother’s spirit descended and spoke to him, promising, “I shall give you relief!” (*shiwon-hae chugetta*). In the same *kut*, the grandmother’s spirit later told the boy’s parents that she had caused them worries (using the antonym of *shiwon-hada*: *taptap-hada*) because the family had ignored her, but that now that the *kut* had been performed everything would be all right.

Experienced shamans consciously work on the feelings of the clients, adapting the format of the ritual to that end. In the early phase of a death ritual held at the Pōmbawi *kuttang* on Namsan in Seoul (12 July, 1992), performed for a 35 year-old man who a few days before had suddenly died in his sleep, his mother, his two maternal aunts, his wife and his younger sister offered food and drink to him in Confucian *chesa* style. In the beginning, the wife and the sister were completely locked up in their grief, unable to express their sorrow. The shamans patiently saw to it that they broke out of this. While a Confucian *chesa* has a set form, with a prescribed number of libations, for instance, here the shamans made the women go on, urging them to talk to the deceased. Still, again and again they just offered food and wine in depressed silence. This went on for about an hour. At last, when one of the shamans told the sister to give her brother a cigarette because he was such a fond smoker, the dams broke: tears flowed copiously and emotions poured out in a torrent. The whole *chesa* continued for such a long time that I began to wonder if this was the main part of the ritu-

3. This ritual is regarded as the first step on the way to becoming a shaman. “False,” bothersome spirits are made to leave, so that proper helping spirits can enter.

al. But then the more familiar parts were performed, one by one. In a most dramatic scene, the shaman, “embodying” the deceased, re-enacted his death agony, which triggered heart-rending outpourings of emotion, and after that spoke with the women through the mouth of the shaman. The sister, who had quietened down, became totally engrossed in this dialogue and, when her “brother” gave details concerning some outstanding financial matters, she grabbed my pen to make notes. In this case, it was obvious that the shamans let the *chesa* continue until all the women were able to release their pent-up emotions and it is unlikely that without this preparation the women would have immersed themselves as fully in the subsequent parts of the ritual as they did.

The variety in the pantheon of the shamans may be seen as one of the instruments allowing the shamans to address very different emotions. It is typical of full-scale rituals that attention is devoted to supernatural beings with very different characters. Some deities are beautiful, calm and serene, others frightening, vengeful and angry, or greedy and inclined to practical jokes. There are bashful maidens, hard-drinking, imperious and violent generals, rough and venal death messengers, bloodthirsty *kunung* (spirits of those who died a violent death), and mischievous but endearing child spirits. Thus, one way to look at the pantheon of the Korean shamans is as a catalogue of human emotions. Even grief so intense that its full expression is unthinkable within the conventions of ordinary social life can be brought out into the open by the shaman in the guise of a spirit. Possessed, for instance, by the spirit of the manager of a car repair shop who burned alive when an oil drum exploded, a shaman rushed around in extreme pain, and rolled screaming over the floor of the office (*naerim kut*, an initiation ritual, Kanghwa-do, 14-15 May, 2000). This unleashed the most violent emotions in his sister and mother, with whom afterwards, when he had calmed down, he had a poignant dialogue. Through the variety of personae the shaman may assume when possessed, she can address the different emotional registers of the clients and adjust the format of the *kut* to “play” on those registers which are most important to the client.

3. The concrete means and mechanisms through which clients are involved in ritual

What needs to be investigated now is how rituals are transformed from general actions such as described in handbooks of folklore into events that have a personal meaning for the clients. This transformation is impossible without certain techniques to involve the clients in the action, and without a thorough individualization of the ritual, necessitating changes in many small details. This may be done in perfect accordance with ritual rules, but individualization also may require changes in the general structure, thus undercutting the notion that it is the very essence of ritual that it only works if executed exactly as prescribed.⁴

In concrete terms, the most important media of communication in any one ritual are food, cloth and money. They are all part of the offerings to the gods and the ancestors, but they also play a key role in the transmission of the effect of the *kut* to the clients. This happens in a very physical way. In the course of a *kut*, countless actions are directly aimed at the body of the clients, which is brought into contact with objects that carry the blessing of the gods or becomes the butt of aggressive manoeuvres intended to exorcize illness and bad luck. Women will hold up their skirts to receive chestnuts and fruits from the altar or clothes worn by the gods. The shamans rub pieces of cloth against their bodies or move pieces of cloth up and down to blow the blessings in their direction. Rice, both cooked and uncooked, is ingested to literally incorporate the blessings.

Money is indispensable in the “logic of reciprocity” of the *kut* (Hogarth 1998, Bruno 1999), but it also acts as a medium to personalize ritual objects and involve the client in the ritual. If money were merely payment to reward the shamans for their services, it would not need to be so conspicuously visible in the ritual itself. Only part of the money that is paid for a ritual is paid beforehand, the remainder is handed over while the *kut* is proceeding. This constantly alerts the client to the specific purpose for which the money is spent and this vis-

4. In *The Gate of Words*, Bruno provides numerous examples of the “breaking of rules” in *kut* (Bruno 2001; esp. Chapter V).

ible demonstration of the quid pro quo principle makes the ritual more convincing and persuasive. It is, moreover, the money which makes the ritual a ritual not for just anyone, but for one specific client and her family. The client's money also personalizes the ritual in a less visible way. Half visible are bills stuck in the headbands worn by certain deities, and if one observes the preparations for a ritual it turns out that several ritual objects are "charged" with hidden 10,000 *won* bills: the small head ornament worn by a bride, the folded paper used to "dress" the bronze mirrors (*myŏngdu*) that represent deities, the paper attached to the drum etc. Bills are also hidden under the uncooked rice in the wooden grain measure that forms part of the tower on which the straw-cutters are placed that the shaman will mount when she is possessed by the spirit of a general. Instead of money, sometimes its pre-modern substitutes, rice and cloth, fulfill a similar function.

Money is frequently used to personalize ritual objects in combination with other media. The *kunungtae* is a stick used by Hwanghae shamans as a symbolic weapon to "hunt" in the sequence for the frustrated, blood-loving *kunung* spirits. On the outside there are pieces of white and rough, yellowish cloth (associated with the dead) bound together with a string from which two bells hang, but inside there are pieces of clothing belonging to the clients, wrapped around a stick: e.g., a T-shirt with Mickey Mouse for the little son, a blouse with a Pierre Cardin logo for the mother, a simple singlet for the father. If no piece of clothing is available, a piece of paper with the name and date of birth of the person is substituted. Ten-thousand *won* bills, too, are inserted in the assemblage. The *kunung* who will "play" with this weapon, which is intentionally bloodied by sticking it in the carcass of a sacrificed pig, is not a nameless spirit, but a dead relative or acquaintance of the clients. "Father's younger brother will play well!," a shaman said, seeing how with great care such a *kunungtae* was assembled.

Personalization by means of clothes, the "personal belongings" par excellence, may take several other forms. In an *aekttaem* ritual (a ritual to avoid mishaps; 13 February 2000), the 10-year old boy for whose benefit the ritual was held was absent, but during a crucial moment — when the shaman had mounted the razor-sharp straw cutters — a sweatshirt belonging to him was put under the shaman's feet, on the

knives, to keep evil forces at bay, in order to ensure through the force of a fierce general that nefarious influences would stay away from him.

Then there are the clothes made for the dead. At a *naerim kut*, the chief shaman showed a magnificent pink set of clothes made with expensive silk for the client's deceased father to his daughter before the ritual began, and asked her if she liked them. She wondered aloud if the color was not too youthful for the "aged" father (Ansan, 28 May 2000). During rituals, it is common that extra sets of clothes are ordered for "ancestors" (*chosang*) whose existence is discovered during the ritual. In the case of the *aeaktaem* mentioned above, no less than ten sets were ordered by telephone at the last moment from the *man-mulsang*, the shop that sells everything a shaman might need, when it was discovered that the client family had more *chosang* needing attention than previously thought.

There are also clothes for the gods that have been donated by the clients (who establish a personal link with gods by giving other paraphernalia as well). In a *nullim kut* (a "suppression" ritual to prevent someone from becoming a shaman) held in a *kuttang*⁵ on Tobongsan on 22 March, 2000, the client showed great interest when the shaman put on several costumes, one over the other, of the *chaktu* [straw-cutter]-mounting General, and verified whether one was the costume she had given.⁶

To reassure the clients that the ritual proceeds smoothly, and ultimately to reassure them that their problems will be resolved (which is the final aim of the *kut*), the shamans make use of divinatory actions of diverse types: *sashil* (balancing of a pig's carcass or other meat on a trident or other balancing tricks), *sanssal* (counting rice grains that have been scooped up with the shaman's bells) or the choosing of coloured flags with symbolical meanings. Sometimes the shaman takes a bowl filled with uncooked rice in her hand and in a swift, vertical movement describes a full circle with it. It is difficult to achieve, but ideally, no rice grains should fall out. "Take care in the Ninth Month,

5. A *kuttang* is a commercial establishment that rents out rooms for rituals.

6. Already in her 1985 book Laurel Kendall devoted attention to the way shamans integrate the personal and "spiritual" background of the clients in the ritual. This means, for instance, that the format of the *kut* may be adapted to allow a family's own guardian deities (with their own clothes) to "play" (Kendall 1985:131-135).

because some of the rice fell down,” a male shaman cautioned a client (*nullim kut*; 22 March, 2000).

Most of the divinatory acts mentioned above are symbolic actions that, apart from the fact that they reassure the clients that things are going well, also suggest to the client that the rules and limitations of daily life are less rigid and confining than they usually appear, or can even be completely invalidated. At times the acts performed look quite miraculous. In a *chinjök kut* (a ritual a shaman performs at her own initiative to thank the gods that help her), a big, narrow-rimmed basin with water was placed on the narrow neck of a large bottle of rice wine, quite eccentrically, and on top of that, in the same way, another basin with *makkölli*, a white alcoholic beverage (Kyeyangsan, 7 April 2000). A photograph of this *mul sashil* (water divination) leaves everyone who sees it wondering how this is possible. Just as is done in the case of *sashil* with a pig, 10,000 wŏn bills were added, this time set afloat on the water and *makkölli*.

Other spectacular feats performed by shamans do not serve a divinatory function, but are performed primarily to lend persuasive power to the idea that the obstacles of the mundane world can be overcome through the special powers of the shamans. The mounting of razor-sharp straw-cutters, and the lifting with the teeth of heavy brass basins or a number of tables tied together, are usually interpreted as feats that can only be performed when the shaman is inspired/possessed (*shin-param-e*), and as such contribute to the authority of the shaman. From the point of view of the clients, their impact is that the ritual space is demarcated more clearly and confidence in the ability of the shamans and the effectiveness of the ritual is increased.

Among the actions that emphasize the privileged relationship the shaman has with the world of spirits and ancestors the mounting of the straw-cutters (*chaktu t'agi*) might be called paradigmatic for the various ways in which the act is personalized. It always takes place on an elevation, which can be made up on the spot with an oil drum or a number of tables. At the *kuttang*, however, the elevation is a permanent fixture, made of cement, with a number of steps facilitating the ascent. This impersonal structure can be personalized by using bags of rice donated by the clients as steps. On top of the elevation is placed a round vessel with water covered with a wooden board, on top of

which there is a wooden grain measure (*mal*) full of grain, once again grain given by the clients. Moreover, money the clients have donated is buried in the grain. This, too, is covered by a wooden board, which supports the straw-cutters. As said above, a garment belonging to one of the members of the client family may be put on the knives at a certain moment to protect him or her against malignant forces. While the shaman is on the knives, she performs a kind of divination by throwing up a handful of uncooked rice grains and catching part of them again. These grains are counted and, when the number is even, ingested by the clients. Cigarettes the *chaktu*-mounting General has smoked (three at a time, and with the burning part in his mouth) are given to clients to finish. When the General has dismounted (the term used is literally to dismount from one's horse: *hama*), water from the vessel under the knives is given to the clients to drink.

It would be very misleading not to mention at all the verbal means used to shape and personalize ritual. *Kongsu* (oracles), in which deities and spirits directly address the clients through the mouth of the shaman, form the core of every ritual. Their contribution to the effectiveness of the ritual is so great and varied, however, that it would be difficult to deal in detail with this aspect here. Others, moreover, have already treated this topic (Guillemoz 1994, Bruno 1998 and 2001). Antonetta Bruno has emphasized that *kongsu* is not a one-way street; it is not just the deity (or the shaman) who communicates a message to the client. Even if it is not a dialogue of equals, *kongsu* demands the involvement of the client as well, and on careful observation it becomes clear that during *kongsu* there is a flow of information in two directions. The shaman learns as much as the client, and obtains data that allow her to personalize the ritual even further. Bruno demonstrates that, for the *kut* to have the desired effect on the client, it is crucial that many of the recurrent phrases in *kongsu* are “performative.” In other words, those phrases are not by themselves true or untrue, but, as reassurances, promises and pledges, their utterance itself constitutes an act which is designed to influence the psyche of the clients. She has also shown that *kongsu* actually rarely consists of the words of the gods only, but usually includes a nimble alternation of the voices of the deity and the shaman. Because the grammatical mood of a Korean sentence only becomes clear at the end, this means that for the client

the difference between a wish uttered by the shaman and a promise by a deity becomes obscure. In this way, the difference between wish and fulfillment is obliterated (Bruno 2001: 129).

Kongsu is, of course, the opportunity par excellence to speak about the personal concerns of the clients, both very seriously and less solemnly. In a *kut* two sisters held for their deceased mother (Seoul, Pömbawi *kuttang*, 4 July, 1991) many other worries of the women were discussed, too, like the son one of them urgently wanted, and litigation in which they were involved. A messenger from the Underworld appeared and, as his kind is wont to, roughly addressed the sisters: “Whom shall I take with me? Someone from here, I think!” “No, no, please take ‘so-and-so’ (the person they were involved in litigation with).”

Verbal means may also be important outside the context of *kongsu* when used by a shaman to build-up confidence in her actions or elaborate on messages presented in *kongsu* (Bruno 2001: Ch. IV). Thus they will talk of dreams they have had in which deities appeared and gave them instructions, or act like the Hwanghae shaman Chongtchöm manshin,⁷ who likes to point out to her clients that some of the spirits she worships (present in effigy on the walls of the *kuttang*) are her deceased relatives who during their lifetime held important positions, such as that of village head, or who were known for their learning.

This does not exhaust the elements of *kut* that have the force to affect the clients. In Hwanghae Province rituals, a multitude of colorful paintings of the deities (*hwan* or *maji*) are hung on the walls, making a powerful contribution to the creation of a special atmosphere. Because all the deities have a special connection with the chief shaman and some in particular are intimately related to her (as predecessors, teachers or ancestors), this is proof of the authority and reliability of the shaman. Music, too, should not be disregarded. When music in Korean shamanism is discussed, the focus usually is on the effect it has on the shaman, particularly the question to which degree it contributes to the shaman’s trance.⁸ It is, however, also an important determinant of the mood of the clients and a way to mark off the separate space of the rit-

7. Manshin is a respectful way to refer to a shaman; Chongtchöm, “Terminal,” is a professional nickname derived from the place where this particular shaman used to live.

ual. Enveloping the clients, the music creates the specific atmosphere that is needed for each section of the ritual. Because particular kinds of music belong to particular acts (e.g. very slow music at the end of a sequence when the shaman bows in front of the altar table, or very fast and wild music when a 'divine general' dances), music also signals phases in the progression of the *kut*, and so makes it easier for clients to grasp what is going on, which is essential to keeping them involved in the ritual (Bruno 2001:19,20, 36). Music is also used to create meaningful silences, heightening the drama when the frantic drumming suddenly stops and the shaman bends over backwards (*hōrikkōkki*) pointing knives at her own body. Moreover, music also helps to keep up momentum, sustaining the mood, when shamans interrupt their dancing or singing to look for a piece of clothing, or a fan etc.

4. The shaman as equilibrist

In his famous and insightful book *Ecstatic Religion*, Ioan Lewis suggested that in marginal cults (which shamans' rituals in Korea have been for centuries; cf. Walraven 1999) possession serves to give voice and power to the oppressed. In Korea, at certain moments possession may actually be used to such a purpose, but it is not its central function. Instead possession may be viewed as an essential factor in the creation of the ritual structure that has the power to effect a transformation in the client. A shaman's capacity to "embody" gods and ancestors sets her apart from ordinary people and is fundamental to her claim that she can perform an effective ritual. To actually realize this, however, she has to be able to transfer messages to the clients (through oracles or otherwise, verbal and non-verbal), convincing them of their truth. Only then will the clients undergo the cognitive and emotional change necessary to enter a new world full of chance and opportunity, rather than sorrow and despair. Their relation to time changes in the same way. It is no longer a maelstrom that inexorably pulls them to their ruin, to bankruptcy, illness or death, but offers

8. For music and shamanism in general cf. Rouget; for the role of music in Korean shamans' rituals cf. Guillemoz 1994:33 and Walraven 1993b.

instead promises of happiness and wealth (Walraven 1993a).

Thus possession is the basis of a culturally defined ritual structure, within which, however, fixed rules should not stand in the way of the personalization of ritual which is essential to its functioning. A *kut* is a precarious balancing act between maintaining a distinct ritual structure and adapting parts of the ritual to suit the needs of the clients. It is also, at the same time, easy and difficult for the clients to understand. Both aspects, however, contribute to the success of the ritual. Only if this is understood can the behavior and utterances of shamans during rituals begin to make sense. Although it is obvious that they change the content and format of the ritual constantly to suit the circumstances, they also worry about ritual details, frequently discussing how things should be done properly, and when in doubt will consult a senior colleague. A fixed, prescribed structure is imperative for the creation of a ritual space that is set off from daily life, in which the normal flow of things is cut off and the clients are “disoriented” in order to change their attitudes and views, so that they are re-oriented toward a brighter future. This space may be described in terms of sacred space, but may also be seen as psychologically functional. Being distinct from secular space, it suggests to the clients that things can be different and also, because of their dependence on the *mudang* for the execution of all kinds of ritual actions within this space, encourages them to entrust their problems to someone else, which at least temporarily lessens their burden.

Flexibility and sticking to the rules are not necessarily exclusive. When one rule is not observed, one may fall back on another, more obscure rule. At the beginning of a death ritual held in the *tūkshil kuttang* near Inch'ŏn (31 October 1999) everyone should have gone out when the drum was first struck, with the clients keeping a respectful distance from the shamans. Because it was raining heavily, everybody stayed indoors. For protection against dangerous forces that pose a threat at such moments, those present were instructed to take off their left socks and put them on their heads. “Who would have invented that rule?” the chief shaman wondered aloud.

There are so many ritual rules and the performance of a full, more or less traditional, ritual requires so much knowledge and so many skills that it is difficult even for experienced clients of long standing to

understand every detail. As noted above, this complexity contributes to the construction of an event that is clearly marked as taking place outside mundane life. If everything would be transparent to the clients from the outset, the *kut* would not have the mystique required to shake them out of their daily routine. Yet, on the other hand, *kut* are quite simple, because the same principles underlie many different acts, which enables clients to understand enough to get involved in the ritual and appreciate the reassuring messages that are transmitted. There is, for instance, a frequent symbolic transfer of blessings to the individual client through the manipulation, in the literal sense of the word, of two basic metaphors (*putt'a*, touching, attaching, and *p'ulda*, taking away, unbinding, dissolving). These metaphors are very versatile and by themselves do not have an inherent auspicious or inauspicious connotation. When the Hwanghae shaman makes her characteristic “ninety-nine bells” (a large number of little bells bound together) “stick” to an apple on the altar and manages to lift the fruit up, this “miraculous” event, which seems to defy gravity, is a good omen. But the *kwishin* (ghosts) that stuck to the boy who was the protagonist of the *hōju kut* and drove him to all kinds of undesirable behavior, such as the smashing of shop windows, should, of course, be sent away.

In ritual practice, acts involving “attaching” and “undoing” are deftly combined to create ritual sequences that are both interesting to view and psychologically convincing. In a *pyōng kut* to heal an old man (Seoul, Pōmbawi *kuttang*, 12 July, 1991) a shaman made knots in a long piece of cloth to use in what is called *ko p'uri*, “undoing the knots” (of frustration, worry). As is usual, the shaman shook the piece of cloth and, lo and behold, the knots became undone, as if by their own accord. Before she did this, however, she had transferred the evil influences that made the man ill to the cloth by rubbing it against his body. Soon after that, the cloth was used again. Now it was torn in two lengthwise, around the body of the old man, which provided the resistance needed to split it. A similar procedure usually takes place at the end of a sequence for ancestors and symbolizes the “parting of the way” (*kil karūgi*) of the living and the dead. Its use in this case suggested that the dissatisfactions of deceased relatives, which had made the man sick, had been taken away and the newly pacified ancestors took their leave.

For the total effect of the *kut* it is also important that similar actions may be performed in various modes. One of these might be called *giocoso* or *scherzando*: playfulness is absolutely crucial to the spirit of *kut*. An action that might be boring and repetitive becomes amusing when a small variation is introduced. On the altar there are always bags of candy for the spirits of little boys and girls. When handing out this candy (in itself an instance of the principle that blessings may be conveyed by the direct physical contact of ingestion), a shaman smilingly used pieces of candy for a kind of divination similar to *sanssal*, the counting of rice grains, lightening the mood.

Although the bewildering multiplicity of ritual details is confusing for the clients, the basic metaphors and actions are easily understood and therefore have persuasive power (or, as some might want to say, perlocutionary force). The effectiveness of *kut* lies in the dexterity with which a small number of fundamentally simple principles is woven together to create a whole in which a fine balance between adherence to ritual rules and personal adaptation maximally affects the clients.

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Boudewijn Walraven is Professor of Korean Studies at Leiden University in The Netherlands and is particularly interested in cultural history and religious practice. Among his recent publications are articles about gender in shamans' songs, the history of Korean popular religion, colonial anthropology and the creation of images of the past in *shijo* poetry. His email address is: B.C.A.Walraven@let. LeidenUniv.nl.