The Functional Value of Ignorance at a Korean Seance

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Students of folklore have yet to appreciate the value of ignorance.[1] Perhaps it is because we have often equated folklore with knowledge[2] that we have viewed lack of knowledge as inimical to the perpetuation of traditions. At any rate, we have not looked for the stabilizing consequences which may result from lack of knowledge but have chosen to see only its disruptive effects, regarding it only as a cause of change. After reviewing the literature on textual variation in folksong, Tom Burns notes:

> Most of those who have considered the matter of textual variation have pointed out the importance of a performer's mishearing, misunderstanding, or forgetting as forces for change.[3]

In his classic study of the folktale, the other major genre of folklore scholarship, Stith Thompson expresses a similar bias: "The first time a change in detail is made in a story it is undoubtedly a mistake, an error of memory."[4] Thus, folklorists have regarded ignorance as

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1. Some anthropologists, on the other hand, attribute a functional or stabilizing value to ignorance. Laura Bohannan shows that ignorance of a comprehensive genealogy can enhance the viability of a segmentary lineage system (see "A Genealogical Charter," *Africa* 22 [1952], 301–315). Similarly, both Edmund Leach and Robert Netting show that ignorance can contribute to the stability of highly complex irrigation systems (see Edmund Leach, *Pul Eliya: A Village in Ceylon* [Cambridge, 1961], 164–165; and Robert McC. Netting, "The System Nobody Knows: Village Irrigation in the Swiss Alps," in *Irrigation's Impact on Society*, ed., Theodore E. Downing and McGuire Gibson [Tucson, 1974], 67–75). I am idebted to Robert Netting for leading me to Bohannan's article.

2. Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," *Journal of American Folklore* 86 (1971), 5–6.

3. "A Model for Textual Variation in Folksong," in *Folklore Forum*, 3 (1970), 50.

4. The *Folktale* (New York, 1946), 437.

inimical to textual stability.

In recent years the theoretical interests of may folklorists have shifted away from the study of texts and toward the study of performance.[5] Rather than view folklore performances simply as recitations of previously memorized texts, many scholars now prefer to regard each performance as a unique manifestation of an underlying body of knowledge or set of rules possessed by the performer. As Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein express it:

> The native cognition of folklore, the *a priori* cultural knowledge required for speaking folklore, consists of more than the possession of a store of traditional items which can be retrieved from memory whenever a situation calls for them, . . . [Instead,] the performer of folklore knows—though he may not be overtly aware of such knowledge—a set of rules, a system of communication, a grammar. . .[6]

The traditional folkloristic prejudice against ignorance is as evident in Ben-Amos and Goldstein's statement as it is in Thompson's. Whether knowledge of rules or knowledge of texts is regarded as the essential element for performing folklore, emphasis is still placed upon knowledge at the expense of ignorance. We are left with no recourse but to regard ignorance negatively—as detrimental to the effectiveness of a performance if not to the stability of a tradition.

The purpose of the present paper is to advance two arguments, the first of which should be significant to performance-centered theory and the second of which is addressed to the older " item-oriented " scholarship.[7] The first of these two arguments is that ignorance rather than knowledge, in some situations at least, enhances the effectiveness of a folklore performance. In other words, an individual may actually perform better if both he and his audience do not know certain rules for performing.

The second of the two arguments pertains to the relationship between ignorance and the stability of traditions: They are not necessarily opposed to each other. A quite stable tradition may have an element of ignorance " built into " it, and that element need not induce any change whatsoever. An item may be passed on indefinitely with some of its parts unknown—and, perhaps, even *because* some of its parts are

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5. For an excellent summary of this performance-centered approach, see Richard Bauman, " Verbal Art as Performance," *American Anthropologist* 77 (1975), 290–311.

6. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein, " Introduction," in *Folklore: Performance and Communication* (Paris and The Hague, 1975), 3.

7. For a defense of item-oriented folklore scholarship, see D. K. Wilgus, " The Text is the Thing," *Journal of American Folklore* 86 (1971), 241–252.

unknown.

These two arguments are based on empirical data gathered during a ritual performance which occurred in a rural Korean village where we conducted fieldwork in 1973–74.[8] Our analysis of this ritual focusses upon a particular point at which the participants did not know what to do, and it attempts to show that their lack of knowledge was not indicative of a faltering tradition but a positive contribution to the effectiveness of their ritual performance. The description and analysis of the ritual follow a brief description of the village and some features of its kinship organization.

Twisŏngdwi is the folk name of a Korean village located about 40 miles south of Seoul. It is comprised of 59 households, 32 of which are headed by members of a single patrilineage. The patrilineage's founding ancestor also founded the village when he first settled there about four centuries ago, and his descendants have continued to dominate the village ever since. Today, many of these descendants, who now comprise the patrilineage, are only remotely related to one another.

Members of the Twisŏngdwi patrilineage calculate degrees of relatedness according to *ch'on*, an abstract unit for measuring genealogical distance between collateral kinsmen.[9] For example, the distance between a person and any of his parents siblings is three *ch'on*; and the distance between a person and the children of those parents' siblings (i.e., " first cousins " in American terminology) is four *ch'on*.

Ch'on are also used to define genealogical segments of the patrilineage. A four-*ch'on* segment, for example, includes the households of all kinsmen whose genealogical distances are four *ch'on* or less. Such a group would include households headed by a male patrilineage member and all of his paternal kinsmen up to and including first cousins.[10] A six-*ch'on* segment includes second cousins; an eight-*ch'on* segment includes third cousins; and a ten-*ch'on* segment includes fourth cousins. Patrilineage members do not usually measure genealogical distance beyond ten *ch'on*, although in theory they could do so. Many

8. For a description of the village and our joint research there, see Roger L. Janelli, " Korean Rituals of Ancestor Worship: An Ethnography of Folklore Performance," (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975).

9. For more complete descriptions of the *ch'on* system, see Kwang-Kyu Lee and Youngsook Kim Harvey, " Teknonymy and Geonomonymy in Korean Kinship Terminology," *Ethnology* 12 (1973), 32–33; Eugene Biernatzki, " Varieties of Korean Lineage Structure," (Ph. D. Dissertation, Saint Louis University, 1967), 22–23; and Janelli, 46–48.

10. Only two households were headed by women, both widows, at the time of our fieldwork. The status of each of their respective households was determined by the genealogical positions of either an adult son or deceased husband.

do not keep track of genealogical ties beyond eight *ch'on*. Relatives beyond those boundaries are simply referred to as " distant " kinsmen.

Patrilineage members view segments formed on the basis of *ch'on* as obvious and natural kin groups. Such groups assemble to carry out activities which require the participation of a kin group larger than a family, such as the performance of ancestral rituals and the wearing of mourning dress at funerals. Four, six, and eight-*ch'on* groups all occur, depending on the nature of the occasion, the number of participants desired, and the strength of their kin ties.

Ancestral rituals are the main form of religious activity in Twisŏngdwi. Associated with Confucianism in the minds of villagers, these rituals are usually performed exclusively by males. However, women assist at some of them by preparing food offerings and carrying them from the kitchen to the place of the ritual.

Besides ancestors, the Korean ritual supernatural pantheon includes ghosts and deities.[11] The former are spirits of the malevolent dead: those who died without descendants, violently, or with some pressing desire unsatisfied. They live miserably in the afterworld—like beggars in the world of the living. Unlike ancestors they receive no ancestral rituals and thus have no regular source of food. Afflicting the living and extorting food offerings from them is their own means of livelihood. Fortunately, they are usually satisfied with small offerings.

Deities too are often satisfied with small offerings, especially if they are regularly proffered. At times, however, they demand more substantial propitiation, including not only large amounts of food but entertainment as well. None of the Twisŏngdwi villagers possesses the skills required to perform this type of propitiation. Instead, they must call in professional religious practitioners known as *mudang*.[12]

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11. The belief in three major types of supernaturals (i.e., gods, ghosts, and ancestors) is quite similar to that reported for China; however the Korean gods are not hierarchically related. For a dexription of the Chinese pantheon, see Arthur P. Wolf, " Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed., Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, 1974), 131–182.

12. For western language accounts of *mudang* and their religious practices, see Leonard Turner, " The Social and Psychological Role of the Korean Sorceress," (Unpublished manuscript in the Human Relations Area Files); Yim Suk-jay, " Introduction au mouïsm," *Revue de Corée*, 4, No. 2 (1972), 5–22; Yi Bo-hyung, " Introduction à la musique des kout," *Revue de Corée*, 4, No. 2 (1972), 23–26; Ch'oi Kil-sung, " Les Pyŏl-chine-kout de la côte Sud-east," *Revue de Corée*, 4, No. 2 (1972), 37–52; Kim Tae-gon, " Etude du processus initiatique des chamans coréens," *Revue de Corée*, 4, No. 2 (1972), 53–71; Lee, Jung Young, " The Seasonal Rituals of Korean Shamanist Healing Ceremonies in Korea," *Korea Journal*, 13, No. 4 (1973),

One of these *mudang* lives in an adjacent village.

Major rituals of propitiation performed by *mudang* are called *kut*. These *kut* are a means of feeding, entertaining with song and dance, and otherwise attempting to please and placate the collectivity of supernatural beings. Some *kut* are directed primarily at specific deities, but all of the various types of supernatural beings gather wherever there are crowds of people, feasting, and music. To entertain one supernatural being, therefore, one must entertain them all—or else risk serious repercusions, especially from neglected ghosts.[13]

When viewed side by side as two forms of religious activity, *kut* and Confucian ancestral rituals offer many points of contrast. As noted earlier, Twisŏngdwi villagers perform their own ancestral rituals, but their *kut* are performed by professional *mudang* who come from outside the village. In addition, the leading performers at *kut* are usually female *mudang* whereas the performers at ancestral rituals are almost exclusively men. By the same token, it is women rather than men who express the greatest interest in *kut* performances. At the Twisŏngdwi *kut* which we observed, about thirty women were present, including a few from a neighboring village. Aside from two male *mudang* and one of us, the only male present during the performance was the person for whose benefit the *kut* was performed.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the *kut* and the ancestral rituals is to be found in the way in which each of them is performed. Rituals for ancestors are formal occasions: they are performed in a solemn atmosphere in which a retrained style of behavior is appropriate. *Kut*, on the other hand, are performed to entertain and amuse supernatural beings. Singing and dancing by the *mudang*, together with continuous joking and lighthearted laughter on the part of all the participants, are evident nearly throughout the entire performance. *Kut* exude the atmosphere of a carnival; in fact, they are sometimes included among the attractions at secular carnivals without any apparent loss of supernatural purpose.

Kut are performed in order to propitiate supernatural beings for a variety of purposes, such as, to ensure the well-being of one's household, to enhance one's personal fortune, to rid a child of smallpox, to ensure the well-being of a village community, or to comfort the spirit

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40–47; Lee, Jung, Young, " The Communal Rituals of Korean Shamanism," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 9, 1974), 82–90; Chang Chu-Keun, " Mu-Sok——the Shaman Culture of Korea," in *Folk Culture in Korea*, ed., Chun Shin-Yong (Seoul, 1974), 59–88; and Laurel Kendall, " Caught Between Ancestors and Spirits: Field Report of a Korean Mansin's Healing Kut," *Korea Journal*, 17, No. 8 (1977), 8–23.

13. Yim Suk-jay, personal communication.

of a recently deceased ancestor.[14] The *kut* which we observed in Twisongdwi was performed to cure the illness of a patrilineage household-head. The *mudang* from the neighboring village as well as three *mudang* and their assistant from the provincial capital of Suwon were called in to perform it. The complete ritual lasted a whole night and well into the following day.

Since the purpose of our fieldwork in Twisongdwi was to study ancestral rituals, we were especially interested in that portion of the *kut* which involved the ancestors. So were the villagers, but for other reasons. Known as the " ancestor *kut*," this segment of the total *kut* performance consisted of a seance during which the spirits of the deceased came and spoke to their living descendants and kinswomen. It began at about 2: 30 in the morning and lasted for well over an hour.

Prior to the start of the ancestor *kut*, while preparations were being made for it, a woman entered the room where the *mudang* and spectators were gathered to ask how many pairs of chopsticks and how many wine cups should be placed upon the food-offering table. To appreciate the significance of her question, one must know that a wine cup and pair of chopsticks constitute a ritual place-setting. At ancestral rituals, one wine cup and one pair of chopsticks are placed upon the food-offering table for each commemorated ancestor. If an ancestor and his wife are commemorated simultaneously, two such place settings are used. If an ancestor's wife died and he later remarried, three such place settings are used: one for the ancestor and one for each of his wives. At one " new-style " ritual we saw fourteen different ancestors (of different generations) commemorated simultaneously with fourteen wine cups and fourteen pairs of chopsticks. Thus, in asking how many place settings to arrange, the woman was also asking how many ancestors would come to participate in the ancestor *kut*.

A male *mudang* who had come with the others from the city of Suwon was the first to try and answer her question. He announced, with an authoritative air, that there should be enough place settings for twelve ascendant generations of paternal ancestors (i.e., twenty-four place settings, unless some of the male ancestors happened to have had multiple wives). His answer was simply ignored by everyone else present, including all of the other *mudang*. He later repeated it, but with the same result. After a brief pause, one woman suggested that places should be set for all those ancestors commemorated by the six-*ch'on* segment to which the household belonged; but another woman suggested that eight *ch'on* would be a more appropriate limit. In

14. Yim Suk-jay, personal communication.

effect, the two women were advocating that places be set for all those ancestors at whose ancestral rituals the household head should participate. Like those two women, the rest of the village is divided over whether responsibilities for participation in ancestral rituals should extend to the ancestors of six, eight, or even ten-*ch'on* kinsmen; although in actual practice, ancestral ritual performing groups rarely exceed four or five *ch'on*. In other words, a patrilineage member really participates in ancestral rituals for his own immediate ancestors and for those of his three, four, and five *ch'on* kinsmen only. Thus, in suggesting six and eight *ch'on* as limits appropriate for the ancestor *kut*, the two women were expressing ideal norms recognized as appropriate for measuring the scope of an individual's responsibilities toward his immediate kinsmen's ancestors.

The women were never able to decide whether six or eight *ch'on* would have been more appropriate, for a third woman soon asked whether the *ch'on* should be calculated according to blood ties or according to those of adoption. Her question stumped everyone. Since the paternal grandfather of the household head had been adopted from one branch of the patrilineage into another, a very different set of ancestors would have to be provided for, depending on whether blood or adoptive ties were used for counting *ch'on*. The issue was finally resolved after asking another woman of the patrilineage what she had done when she recently had a *kut* performed at her own house. She said that she had prepared thirty place settings, so all agreed that they might as well use thirty for the present ritual as well.

The preceding episode reveals three facts quite clearly. First, none of the ritual participants really knew which ancestors were to be provided for. Only the male *mudang* from Suwon voiced his opinion with any degree of confidence, but no one else was willing to accept it. The two women who proposed six and eight-*ch'on* limits were merely suggesting the usual criteria for identifying patrilineage segments and ideal norms for ancestral-ritual participation. Moreover, their style of presentation lacked any evidence of conviction, and neither of their suggestions was accepted either.

The second fact revealed by the incident is that the ritual participants never came to a decision about the identities of the ancestors for whom place settings were necessary. Instead, they were left unspecified, the number thirty being adopted only for the sake of expediency.

The third and perhaps most important fact is that the ritual participants were ignorant of something which they wanted to know. Their lack of knowledge was not evidenced by an inability to answer a con-

trived question posed by an outside observer. They were ignorant of a piece of knowledge on which (in their minds) proper ritual performance depended. Before attempting to show how this ignorance contributed to the effectiveness of the ritual, we present a brief description of the ancestor *kut*.

The *mudang* take turns performing various sections of the *kut*. The ancestor *kut* was performed by the youngest *mudang* present, a woman in her late twenties who had come with the others from Suwon. Throughout her performance, she sat on the veranda facing the food-offering table. Occasionally some of the village women came up and sat beside her there, especially when it was one of their own ancestors whose words the *mudang* was speaking.

As the *mudang* sat facing the food-offering table she beat an hourglass-shaped Korean drum and sang out the words of the ancestors. At no point did she lose possession of any of her faculties, nor did she even pretend to do so. She later told us that she simply heard voices and acted as a mouthpiece for those ancestral spirits who had come and wished to speak. Moreoever the *mudang* could select the spirits whose words she uttered. After her performance, when one of the village women asked her why only a few ancestors had spoken, the *mudang* replied that many had wished to speak but the ritual would have taken too long if she had let them all do so.

The ancestor-*kut* resembles in many ways the projective tests used in clinical psychology. The *mudang* speaks the words of specific ancestors, but she does not reveal which of the ancestors is speaking at any given time. This is left for the audience to infer on the basis of clues contained in her utterances. Several times the audience experienced difficulty in determining exactly who was speaking; and even after the performance was completed, some members of the audience disagreed over exactly who had come and spoken. At one point in the ceremony, no one could figure out which ancestor was speaking. Out of sheer desperation, one of the women approached the *mudang*, tapped her on the shoulder and asked, "Who is it?" The *mudang* barked back, greatly annoyed, "Don't ask me now. Wait and see,"

The song of the *mudang* consists largely of laments or complaints, and these contain the clues which allow the audience to infer the identity of the ancestor whose words the *mudang* is singing. Apparently, contented ancestors have nothing to say. Upon hearing the content of a particular lament, the audience must surmise which ancestor would be most likely to utter it. Of course, the more specific the lament, the easier the task of the audience. On the other hand, the *mudang* possesses only a limited knowledge of the villagers and is incapable of

continuously uttering complaints which are specific enough to be especially meaningful to her audience. Thus, her words are highly repetitious and many of the laments and complaints are quite generalized. Most common were complaints about grave locations and complaints about poor treatment received during old age, that is, when the ancestor was alive and dependent upon the succeeding generation for his or her care and support.

Some of the laments uttered by the *mudang* were not generalized but referred to specific details in the lives of the ancestors who allegedly spoke them. Apparently the *mudang* from the neighboring village had primed his visiting colleagues with some information about the villagers.

Most of the ancestors who came and spoke were women; and most often they addressed their remarks to their own daughter-in-law. Herein lies the projective-technique aspect of the seance. The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is fraught with conflict (which finds frequent expression in Korean folktales and proverbs). By voicing complaints about the treatment which aged mothers-in-law receive from their daughters-in-law, the *mudang* plays upon the deepest anxieties and guilt feelings of her audience. Whenever a member of the audience hears one of these complaints, she realizes that the ancestor who is voicing it may turn out to be her own mother-in-law. Even if the ancestor turns out to be (by general consensus) someone else's mother-in-law, or even if one's own mother-in-law is still living, a certain amount of vicarious identification seems likely. Moreover, elderly women can readily identify with the former plight of the spirit. Most of the women were in tears at various points in the seance, but they were laughing and joking continuously throughout the other parts of the *kut*.

Not all of the ancestors who came and spoke were mothers-in-law. One of them was a man who had lived in an adjacent village and had not been a member of the Twisŏngdwi patrilineage. He had merely married a woman of the patrilineage, the father's sister of the household for whose benefit the *kut* was performed. His widow was among the ritual participants, having made the short trip from the neighboring village to enjoy the *kut* with her close relatives.

The ancestor *kut* could not function as a projective (and apparently cathartic) device without the audience's uncertainty about the identity of the ancestors who will come and speak. If the identity of each ancestor were known before he or she began to communicate with the living, projection would not be possible. Therefore, the indecision about the number of chopsticks and wine cups to be placed upon the food-offering table actually aids the projective function of the ancestor

kut. To specify by genealogical criteria the ancestors who might come would set boundaries on their potential identities. By living the boundaries imprecise and loosely defined, the flexibility of the projective device is enhanced, and the job of both the *mudang* and her audience is made much easier. And the appearance of the male ancestor noted above indicates that ritual participants do take advantage of such flexibility. That ancestor lies outside any of the boundaries proposed before the start of the ancestor *kut* (i.e., twelve ascendant generations, six or eight *ch'on* by either blood or adoption). He was, in fact, not even an ancestor of the Twisŏngdwi lineage.

Conclusion

There is no reason to suppose that not knowing which ancestors require place settings will alter in any way the present form of the ancestor *kut.* On the other hand, there are good reasons for supposing that this lack of knowledge makes a positive contribution to effectiveness of the *kut* performance. Thus, our evidence seems to indicate that ignorance, or simply ' not knowing,' need not be regarded as a lapse of memory, a faltering of tradition, or any other deficiency in either the folklore performance or transmission process. Instead, such ignorance may be characteristic of highly effective performances, enhance their very effectiveness, and help maintain a vigorous and healthy tradition in its present form.