

**The Use of Muga in Korean Shaman Kuts
A Case Study for the Application of Performative
Language Theory in Cross Culture Hermeneutics**

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Introduction

By far the most prevalent way to understand the linguistic artifacts of another culture has been to analyze the referential content of the texts or language in question and then translate that content with explanations and commentaries into one's own native language. The hermeneutical task in content analysis is to determine what the language refers to or describes. For western philosophers and historians of religion this has usually meant an analysis of the world view, metaphysics, ethics or other truth claims implicitly or explicitly stated in the religious language that they are attempting to interpret. More recently the hermeneutical task has shifted to an analysis of the structural features of a given language artifact in order to determine either its depth grammar or the sociological framework of which it is an expression.¹ The task of interpretation has often become a question of understanding the social structure or logical syntax of a given linguistic artifact.

When content and structural hermeneutical procedures are applied to theoretical texts from other reflective intellectual traditions, this process has been more or less successful; although, in my opinion, somewhat incomplete. However, when they are applied to the language of religious ritual or liturgy, they are seriously lacking. For example, an analysis of the content of the *Nein fo* (Nembutsu), "Namu Amida Butsu", of Jodo Shin Shu leads almost nowhere as far as the measure of the phrase is concerned.² The same is true of most mantra, dharani, and other short linguistic phrases and formulae that do not depend upon their referential content or significance to have meaning. An analysis of the content of Shinto *norito*, likewise does not tell what the true significance of the *norito* is within Shinto liturgy.³ Although myths and narrative forms may yield to content and structural analysis, often the results of the analysis are inconsequential for understanding the meaning of the language for the worshipper.

Neither content analysis nor structural analysis can tell the interpreter, for example, whether the language being used in a Shinto ritual has *koto dama* or has transformational force

What has been needed in addition to a semantic and syntactical understanding of religious language in cross cultural studies is a pragmatic understanding of the language events, i.e. an understanding of the use of the language and its performative function within the tradition of which it is a part. The foundations for such a hermeneutical approach were set forth in the thoughts of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Charles Peirce.⁴ They have been further developed in the works of J. L. Austin, John Searle, and others.⁵ These philosophers have dealt primarily with the logic of speech acts. I propose that speech acts are not only understood by their logical grammar, but they are also determined by their social usage with leads to specific behavior consequences that can be determined above and beyond the content and structure of what is said. We must look to sociologists like Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger, as well as psychologists like Paul Watzlawick, John Grinder and Richard Bandler in order to synthesize a hermeneutical method that includes the linguistic behavior involved in the use of a given language artifact.⁶ A better understanding of language artifacts can be gained by examining how language is used to transform a set of circumstances, than can be gained by merely examining the informational content or structure of the language in question. Thus to properly understand the *Nein fo* is to understand the transformation of consciousness which occurs in its proper usage. To interpret *norito* is to recognize the transformational force of *semmyo* (emperial decree) in the Japanese cultural tradition and the relationship between *norito* and *semmyo*. The hermeneutical task becomes not only to understand the content and structure of a linguistic artifact, but also its transformational use within the culture.

By examining the use of *muga*, songs, used by Korean shamans during their rituals, *kut*, the following paper is an attempt to show what can be gained by a hermeneutical method which includes the pragmatics or use of the linguistic artifacts being interpreted.⁷ First we shall look at the transformational role of the Korean shaman (*mudang* or *mansin*) in order to understand her use of *muga* during her major ritual performance, the *kut*. Then we shall look at the use of the *muga* to perform their transformational function during the *kut*.⁸

II. The Role of *Mansin*

The Korean shaman is a ritual specialist with a role that is defined by a tradition that must be mastered in order to function in it. The role is not open to everyone. A *mansin* must be "chosen" for the role by possession (*sinbyong*) which is often a severe trauma bordering on insanity, or she must be in a hereditary line to receive the art.⁹

Within the tradition she is seen as predestined to her role and really cannot avoid playing her part without serious consequences to herself and others.¹⁰ Upon successful initiation (*naerim-kut*) a mansin is obliged to undergo a tutelage under her spiritual mother (*sinomimi*). She must learn not only how to enact the proper ritual, but she must commit to memory the words of the *muga* (songs), the dance steps, and the proper use of the paraphernalia which is part of her ritual enactments.¹¹ She must know proper sacrifices for each spirit and each element of the kut, which in some cases may go on for several days. It is no mean accomplishment to be able to enact the mudang's ritual with grace and skill. Often mudangs will call on one another when the particular kut they are performing is not one of their repertoire or is not one in which they are particularly skilled.¹²

In previous years none of these instructions were written down. They had to be learned through an apprenticeship with the mudang's spiritual mother. Until quite recently Korean shamanism has been an oral tradition in a society where Confucian and Buddhist literature and written liturgies abounded. What is important to note is that apart from the modern shaman's associations, religious practices have taken place among rather loosely connected groups of mudangs or in a hereditary shaman family. There is very little institutionalization or development of canonical texts that would lead to standardization. Uniformity among Korean shamans is more a matter of cooperation and tradition rather than coercion. Cooperation is usually quite good, but occasionally rivalries do develop on a personal level between shamans.

Part of a mudang's religious activities centers in her private shrine, often her home. She may use this shrine as a place for worship for her clients, but she may also go to the homes of the clients or to a public shaman house. There are times when a shaman or several shamans will set up temporary shrines in an auspicious location on a mountain or valley. One site I visited on a mountain near Taegu had some twenty shamans operating. The next day when I came back to the site to follow up on some of my observations, the place had been completely abandoned and no traces of the mudangs or their worship were to be found.

A mudang often begins her practice with very little of the paraphernalia necessary for carrying out an extensive kut. As she practices her art, she acquires patrons (*tan'gol*) who over the life time of her practice eventually supply her with the necessary tools of her trade.¹³ She must acquire numerous costumes, altar paraphernalia, musical instruments, and other props for the kut. Usually these are acquired over a period of time as gifts from her patrons to herself or to the spirit which she serves.

Although the cost may run rather high for the mudang's services, the patron usually has a close personal relationship with her mudang, and often becomes part of her spiritual family. The mudang, if she is to perform her role properly, must learn the

family spirit history of her patron and the patron's husband's family in order to be able both to diagnose the family's fortunes and intercede appropriately with the spirit world of her patron's household. A bond of intimacy and familiarity is often a dynamic part of the mudang's practice with her patron.

By virtue of her calling and her skill, the mudang is a specialist in mediating between humans and spirits. She is chosen by the spirits and by her patrons to mediate between the two worlds. She is not empowered in her own being, nor does she have superhuman powers apart from the spirits who enable her. Her words and deeds are not intrinsically powerful; they acquire their force from her skill as a medium, messenger, and mediator.¹⁴

Many religious roles in Korea are gender specific. Although males may incidentally participate in shaman rites, Korean Shamanism is predominantly a women's cult.¹⁵ Women make up the vast majority of both shamans and patrons of shamans. Male participation, when it does occur, is an anomaly. Male religious roles are more closely associated with Confucian and public village rituals.

III. Muga: The Language of the Kut

In order to understand the performative use of muga, i.e. how a mudang performs the role of mediator, let us begin with the broadest context of the mudang's activities and narrow the context down to the purpose of the kut. Mudangs mediate the spirit world in a number of different ways. They are first and foremost spiritual advisors to their clients. This is done through simple consultations. Some mudangs pay regular visits to their clients' homes and some patrons visit their mudang at her shrine on a regular basis.¹⁶ The advice that the mudang gives may cover any of the decisions of daily life. The patrons' interpersonal relationships are often the subject of advice, especially those related to other members of the client's family or to the spirits of one's family and the spirits of the family of one's husband. The second function of the mudang is to perform spirit rituals such as minor blessings, exorcism, and cleansing rites.¹⁷ She may also be called on to manufacture spirit charms (*pujok*) out of esoteric figures, diagrams, or characters. Finally, the mudang may be called on to perform kut. The kut is not an everyday event. It is very expensive and reserved for important or extraordinary occasions. It is the most public and colorful aspect of the mudang's function and, consequently, has received more attention than her other functions. The kut, however, is only one aspect of her mediation.

The immediate purpose of a kut is related to the occasion when it is held. Some kuts are essentially seasonal or correspond to an auspicious date such as the seventh day of the seventh moon. Other kuts are held at crisis times or to avoid crises. Some kuts are held to improve one's fortune; others are held to secure the birth of a male child; still

others are held for the purpose of healing or the sending away of the spirit of a recently deceased family member, etc. In each case the kut is performed in order to gain the favor and assistance of the spirits. There is no absolute guarantee that a given kut will effect the consequences intended. The kut is not an automatic, mechanical, or magical process. Spirits are more or less cooperative or stubborn. They may be generous in their assistance or greedy and uncooperative. However, among shamanists the belief is that without the kut there is not much chance of gaining the good will of the spirits.

Although there have been numerous attempts to explain Korean Shamanism in terms of Mongolian Shamanism, the two phenomena are different. Korean shamans do not necessarily go into ecstatic states; some do, and some do not. Most hereditary mudangs do not. The primary purpose of the kut is not to mediate the presence of a spirit in the person of the mudang.

The language and ritual acts of the kut are not magical formulae that produce results once they are uttered. Some of the words uttered at the kut may be considered to come from the spirits through the mudang, but not all of them by far. There are magical phrases in Korean Shamanism, but the *muga*, or songs of the kut, are not among them. The kut, as a whole, is a favor (sacrifice or offering) performed for the spirits in exchange for the spirits' blessings. The fact that kuts are sacrifices offered at crisis times in life does not, however, completely explain their uniqueness.

Kuts usually follow a basic pattern divided into several kori or acts.¹⁸ The *muga* that are sung during each kori express the function of the kori. The first kori of a kut is usually an exorcism of lesser spirits and is done outside the home or shrine where the kut is being held. Mudangs do not usually wear special costumes for this opening cleansing rite. Commonly there are ten or eleven kori or acts that make up the main body of the kut. These are performed in the shrine in full costume before the altars covered with meats, breads, fruits, melons, and beverages which are offered to the spirits. The final act is a departure kori to send the spirits away and is usually done outside the shrine and without costumes. The departure kori generally includes the distribution of foods.

The *muga* of the central kori make up the heart of the kut and set forth a drama dedicated to the spirits. An invitation is issued to the spirits to come and join the festivities and play. This is followed by other songs and accompanying dance that dramatize the spirit world and please the spirits. Among ecstatic shamans the spirits may join in the drama (play) and communicate (*kongsu*) through the mudang who is their medium in the play.¹⁹ In non-ecstatic hereditary mudang kuts the drama simply continues with song and dance. Among ecstatic mudangs, after the spirit speaks through the mudang, the play is continued with songs, dances, divination, etc., in full costume. Members of the audience may also be asked to don the costumes and enter into the spirit drama. As the play continues, the mudang will not only address supplications to the

spirits for their blessing but will also express gratitude to the spirits for their presence. The key to the language of the kut is the play itself. Along with the food, money, and other gifts that become part of the drama, the songs and dances are meant to please and entertain the spirits.

If the purpose of the kut is to solicit the blessings of the spirits, the primary means of getting their aid is by entertainment. The shrine is a stage and the altars, offerings, song and dance, and costumes are all part of the entertainment of the spirits who are invited and enticed to be a part of the play. By "play", I mean both entertaining drama and fun. A kut is successful if everyone has a good time, especially the spirits. The spirits bless those with whom they have a good time. Sometimes during a kut there is considerable bantering back and forth between the mudang and the members of the audience. This bantering is often earthy, suggestive, and even bawdy. At some kuts a fair amount of wine is consumed by the participating parties. Interspersed with the song and dance there may be periods of divination, fortune telling, and special blessings, especially for members of the client's family. Some of the divination procedures are spectacular, like the balancing of the mudang on sharp swords or the standing of weapons on end without supports. These feats are performed to divine the approval of the spirits, but they also serve as additional entertainment for the audience.

Walraven's list of themes used in the muga is illustrative of the diverse thematic nature of the entertainment songs.²⁰ The themes include the most mundane matters from the sawing of logs and counting different kinds of wine bottles to the tracing of the development of a fetus in the womb. Often the themes of mugas are nothing more than the cataloguing of objects or the listing of a spirit's residences. There are some mugas which are narratives, such as the transportation of lumber from the mountains into the city of Seoul and the building and decoration of a house.²¹ Where narrative mugas have a "religious" theme, they seem to depend upon Korean mythology and folk tales. There are scholars who say that the mugas are older than the myths and legends of Korean literature and culture, but the lack of early texts for mugas and the freedom with which shamans have borrowed from Chinese, Buddhist, and other religious traditions seems to point to the dependence of the muga on other traditions rather than vice versa.²² Walraven correctly states that the narrative mugas are more closely akin to folk tales than classical mythology.²³ Certainly in the narrative mugas there is no notion of *heilsgeschichte* nor are there long epics about the gods.

Not only are the themes and subject matter of the mugas similar to those in other forms of Korean entertainment, the mugas have a close structural similarity to other forms of entertainment genres such as the *kasa* (verse forms originally for musical accompaniment), *sijo* (three line verses), *pansori* (one man operas), and *Chanqquk* (musical theater).²⁴ Granted that the muga is less sophisticated; nevertheless, it is structurally

representative of an aspect of Korean entertainment genre.

The mugas, although somewhat standardized, are open to improvisation by the mudang. As an oral tradition, mugas are susceptible to omissions and additions and the improvisation of the mudang performing them. They are also better suited for play because of their element of spontaneity. The rhythm and beat of the musical accompaniment seem to me to affect the rhyme and meter of the verse, especially during those periods when the mudang improvises. This is not always evident in the written form of muga. It seems to me that during a performance mudangs often get caught up in the music and playfulness of a kut, and their formulized improvisations are often crude and unmusical, but they are nevertheless entertaining and even humorous.²⁵

Mudangs are entertainers of the spirits, and their relationship to the class of entertainers is well-established. When mudangs do not play the instruments for other mudangs, they employ professional musicians to accompany them. Some hereditary mudangs have "shaman" husbands who are musicians and entertainers themselves (mugu).²⁶ The longstanding relationship between male entertainers called *kwangdae* and mudangs is well-documented, as is the relationship between mudangs and *kisaeng*, female entertainers of men.²⁷ Historically, within the social class of entertainers, mudangs were women entertainers of spirits. Maybe, more importantly, they were women entertainers of other women.

The life of a traditional Korean woman was rather grim.²⁸ Especially after marriage, she lived in virtual servitude to her husband and his family. Life was determined by responsibilities. As one writer put it, "In Korea, the husband and his family have the status of rights and privileges and the wife, the status of duties and obligations (sic)."²⁹ When she left her natal home, she essentially left her family of origin, but she also remained in many respects an outsider in her husband's home and family. Often she was subservient to a mother-in-law who relished her authority over her daughter-in-law and treated her much as she had been treated by her own mother-in-law. As a wife, she was cut off from the world of men and excluded from major participation in traditional religious rituals. Shamanism was her major outlet, an area where she could function in what is virtually a sisterhood. Not only did she have status within Shamanism, but she also had leverage. By placating the spirits through Shamanism, she could fulfill a recognized need in the family affairs, and at the same time she could overcome some of the meanness of life by throwing a party. Entertaining the spirits not only warded off evil and brought about the good

will of the spirits, it helped turn the grim stress in the lives of Korean women into celebration and fun.

Mugas, as the songs of kut, have as their performative religious function the

entertainment of spirits. Their use has little to do with their representational features or subject matter. Their pragmatic meaning and primary significance lies in their use as entertainment, that is, their ability to bring pleasure to spirits and humans.

Notes

1. In the first case the methodologies have rested on the work of Noam Chomsky, Jerrold Katz and Jerry A. Fodor who have developed theories of structural grammar and the psychological implications commensurate with these theories. See Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1965; Jerrold J. Katz, *The Philosophy of Language*, New York, Harper, 1966; and, "Mentalism in Linguistics," in *Language*, XL, No. 2, 1964. For a hermeneutics based on the relationship between the structures of society and the structures of a text, see Claude Levi-Strauss. *Structural Anthropology* New York, Doubleday, 1967.
2. James H. Ware, "The Performative Function of the Nembutsu in Shin Buddhism," unpublished paper given at the Southwest Conference on Asian Studies, Dallas, Texas, Oct. 1986.
3. James H. Ware, "Norito: Performative Language in Japanese Shinto Shrine Worship", unpublished paper given at the Southwestern Division of the American Academy of Religion, Dallas, Texas, March, 1987.
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York, Macmillan Company, 1953; Charles S. Peirce, *Elements of Logic* in *Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, edited by Charles Hartshorn and Paul Weiss, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard, 1960, Vol.II, pp. 142 ff, and "The Experimentalist's View of Assertions," in *Contemporary Philosophical Problems*. Yervant H. Krikorian and Abraham Edel (eds.), New York, Macmillan, 1959.
5. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, J. O. Urmson (ed.). New York, Oxford University, 1955; John Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1969.
6. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, Basic Books, 1973; Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, New York, Doubleday, 1967; Paul Watzlowick, *The Pragmatics of Human Communication*, New York, Norton, 1967; and, John Grinder and Richard Bandler, *The Structure of Magic*, Science and Behavior Books, 1976.
7. In 1969 I began my first field work in Korean religions with a wide variety of on-site observations including numerous contacts with different shaman establishments in the Seoul area. Over subsequent years my observations have been primarily at Kuksadang in Seoul and another shaman house near West Gate. However, I also made contact with shamans at other locations including the observation of kuts during the seventh day of the seventh month celebration just outside the city of Taegye where a group of twenty or more shamans had set up their place of worship

in a small mountain valley.

I am indebted to a host of Korean scholars who have accompanied me to shaman houses or have sat down with me to discuss various aspects of Shamanism. They have helped me with translations and interpretation of conversations which I would not have understood without them. This study would never have gotten off the ground had it not been for Professor Kim Hyung Suk, who took me on my first trip to Kuksadang, and also introduced me to other scholars. I am deeply grateful to Professors Moon Sang Hi, Ryu Tong Shik, Dong Sik Sihn, Rhi Min Yong, Kim Soo Kuen, Joe Hung Yom, Kim Sung Woo, Seo Dac Seok, and John Sommerville. Without their help I would have been completely lost. Any on-going process of understanding is always incomplete and flawed. In no way do I want to suggest that those who have helped me are responsible for my errors or inadequacies. The subject of this paper is the performative use of religious language, and I take full responsibility for the interpretation and choice of information set forth. At the same time it would be very ungracious of me not to acknowledge those who have so graciously given me their time and expertise.

8. Since 1969 I have photographed and tape-recorded numerous kuts; however, it is impossible to decipher the songs on the recordings because of the background noise of both music and people speaking and moving about. I have relied on B. C. A. Walraven, Alan Heyman, and Jung Young Lee for English translations of muga. B. C. A. Walraven, *Muga; Songs of Korean Shamanism*, Leiden, University of Leiden, 1985; Alan C. Heyman, "The Ritual Song of the God Sonnim", *Korea Journal*, XXIII, 11 pp. 50-7 (1983); Jung Young Lee, *Korean Shamanistic Rituals*, Hague, Mouton Publishers, 1981.
9. Youngsook Kim Harvey, *Six Korean Women; The Socialization of Shamans*, New York, West Publishing Co., 1979.
10. Harvey, *Six Korean Women*, p. 6.
11. For details of dance steps, costumes, and kut paraphernalia see Halla Pai Huhn, *Kut; Korean Shaman Ritual*, Seoul, Hollym, 1980.
12. Laura Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and other Restless Spirits*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 69 ff.
13. Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and other Restless Spirits*, pp. 79-80.
14. Walraven, *Muga*, pp. 38 ff.
15. Kendall, *Shaman, Housewives, and other Restless Spirits*, pp. 27-9.
16. Walraven, *Muga*, p. 4; Mun Sang-hi, "Shamanism in Korea," in *Korean Thought*. International Cultural Foundation (ed.), Seoul, Si-sa-yong-o-sa Publishers, 1982, pp. 32 ff.
17. Mun, "Shamanism in Korea," p. 30.
18. Ryu Tong-shik, "The World of Kut and Korean Optimism," *Korea Journal*, Vol. XIII, 8

(1973), p. 16.

19. Walraven, *Muga*, p. 37.
20. Walraven, *Muga*, pp. 63-71.
21. Walraven, *Muga*, pp. 127-74.
22. Walraven, *Muga*, pp. 89 ff.
23. Walraven, *Muga*, pp. 87 ff. For examples of shamans' narratives see Lee Tae Dong, "Princess Pari," and "A Shamanistic Diety Epic (Chesok)," *Korea Journal*, XVIII, 6 (1978), pp. 52-68 and Alan Heyman, "Ritual Song of the God Sonnim," pp. 50-7.
24. Walraven, *Muga*, pp. 96-107; David McCann, "Structural Elements of the Kasa," *Korea Journal*, Vol. XIV, 6 (1974), pp. 27 ff.
25. Kendall states, "The expressed purpose of the kut, in the mansin's words, is; '... to feed the spirits and have them play,' (*moggo nolda*). If the household spirits are thus satisfied, they will do well by the family and encourage it to prosper." Kendall, "Caught Between Ancestors and Spirits: Field Report of Korean Mansin's Healing Kut." *Korea Journal*, XVII, 8 (1977), p. 15. See also Kim Yal-kyu, "Several Forms of Korean Folk Rituals, Including Shaman Ritual," in *Customs and Manners in Korea*. International Cultural Foundation (ed.). Seoul, Si-sa-yong-o-sa Publishers, 1982, pp. 58 ff.
26. Mun, "Shamanism in Korea," p. 33.
27. Yi Kyu-tae, *Modern Transformation of Korea*, Seoul, Sejong Publishing Co., 1970, pp. 97-102.
28. Harvey, *Six Korean Women*, pp. 253-71; Soh Kwang-hae and Kim Yeol-kyu, "Dialogue; Traditional Thought and Manners," in *Customs and Manners in Korea*, pp. 127 ff.
29. Harvey, *Six Korean Women*, p. 257.

