

Social and Cultural Implications and Mutual Exchange in Mask Dances in Korea and India

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The urge to express, communicate, and share something beautiful, gave birth to visual performing arts. In this process, the living progressive impulse to the timeless universal gets a coherent shape in creative designs. The arts are changing their structures continuously over centuries, modifying itself to the needs of the changing situations, making it functionally relevant to the society. Masks are the most ancient means of changing identity and assuming a new role. The origins of the word 'mask' is unclear. It probably came from the Arabic word 'mashkara' which meant 'to falsify', or 'transform' into animal, monster, joker. In Italy the word became 'maschera' and it finally entered the English vocabulary as 'mask'. Mask refer to an object placed over the face or covering the entire head so that the face is concealed. The expression 'masquerade' refers to the ritual performance of the maskers as well as theatrical productions with masked and costumed players. Masks have been created to satisfy the desires and challenges of the society. Masks symbolize the ability to transform, to go to other worlds, to appease the divine spirits. Traditional theatres have grown out of ritual performances whose roots are in mythology and religion. Theatrical masks are recognized more for their entertainment value than for their spiritual or ritual significance. Actors assume specific role that are scripted for them and the masks establish character types. Masks say much about the people who make them and the cultures that use them. The making of the mask often requires tremendous amount of human resources. Masked performances entertain, provoke, inspire fear, instructs audiences and participants in moral and value education. It helps to reconstruct social memory, to assert national and regional identity and also in creating a new identity.

John Emigh, in *Masked Performance*, uses this to illustrate the potential for creative ascendance in the mask.

‘When a Balinese actor holds a new mask in his right hand, gazing upon it, turning it this way and that, making it move to a silent music, he is assessing the potential life of the mask and searching for the meeting place between himself and the life inherent in its otherness. If he is successful, then a bonding takes place that will allow him to let the potential life flow through his own body. If he finds that place of congruence between his physical and spiritual resources and the potential life of the mask, then a living amalgam is created: a character, a persona. This amalgam is at best unstable- based as it must be upon paradox, ambiguity, and illusion- but "it" moves, "it" speaks, "it" breaths, "it" is perceived- by the performer and by the audience- as having an organic integrity’. (Emigh: 1996). The roots of mask work lie in sacred ritual. Modern examples abound as well. Those Asian ritual masks that represent gods and spirits are "housed" and "fed" as part of their sacred nature. Historically the mask is a catalyst for transportation out of the self and into something transformative. The depth of that transformation, as stated, hinges on ritual and, as evidenced in the common experiences of those who address this transformation; specific elements of that journey- through ritual to spontaneity- have been identified. Practical transformation, the essence of any mask performance ritual, enjoys universal, observable attributes. (Elston:2004).

Transformation takes place through ritual inhabitation of the mask as the performer is literally on the threshold of something new. This transformation resembles what Victor Turner dubbed "Liminal Phases".

‘Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.’ (Turner:1969)

Richard Schechner's suggested definition of the experience of the action of the liminal phase:

‘The work of the liminal phase is two-fold: first, to reduce those undergoing the ritual to a state of vulnerability so that they are open to change. Persons are stripped of their former identities and assigned places in the social world; they enter a time-place where they are not-this-not-that, neither here nor there, in the midst of a journey from one social self to another. For the time being, they are literally powerless and often

identityless. Second, during the liminal phase, persons are inscribed with their new identities and initiated into their new powers. There are many ways to accomplish the transformation...The possibilities are countless, varying from culture to culture, group to group, ceremony to ceremony' (Schechner:2002).

Chho is the traditional ritual dance-drama held on the occasion of the annual sun festival around 14th April in three adjoining districts of three neighbouring states – West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in India. There are three types of Chho dance – Saraikela, Mayurbhanj and Purulia.

Chho dance is performed on the occasion of gajan or the annual sun festival in Bengal on the last day of Bengali year corresponding to 14th of April every year. It continues through May and June covering a period of two months. The sowing season begins immediately following the conclusion of the dance season. Thirteen days after the festival, a series of rituals begins. A number of Bhaktas or devotees drawn from different castes that are considered lower than Brahmin perform some religious rites daily. They wear red dhotis and like the Brahmins, wear sacred threads. The bhaktas assemble near the Shiva temple and are first converted to Shiva gotra or the clan of Lord Shiva. They become the kinsmen of Lord Shiva for thirteen days. For all these days, they go to the temple and perform a ritualistic dance to a typical tune and rhythm. The people in the village participate in 'cap' – a ritualistic, representational procession. Men dress themselves as women. They dress themselves as tiger, bear, monkey, bullocks. They smear their bodies with mud, wear dresses made of straw and rags and skulls, sticks and branches of trees. The procession moves through the winding lanes of the village with the beats of the drum. This ritual is called 'telhalda'. The bhaktas or the devotees sing religious songs while moving with the procession. In the night, during the worship of Lord Shiva, the bhaktas bathe themselves and in wet clothes move around the temple in a circle a number of times and then dance in front of the sacred lamp of the temple. All these rituals have symbolic significance as laid down in the Hindu scriptures. The ritual significance lies at a much deeper level, because in India, every little religious performance has sacred connotation which is intricately related with the organic process of living in the village community.

Performance

Chho dance of Purulia is an open-air dance. The performance is held on bare ground

without any raised platform or stage of any kind. An open enclosure of about 20 feet in length and 20 feet in breadth serves as dancing area. A corridor of 25 feet in length and five feet in breadth is kept for entrance and exist of the artistes. The corridor also becomes a part of the performing area and the dance starts immediately with the entrance of an artiste at the farthest corner of the corridor. The courtyard of any house, cleared space in the forest or even the embankment of a river or pond could serve as the dancing arena. Soil in Purulia is hard and full of pebbles. As the dancers frequently jump in the air and fall on their knees, it is essential that the soil should be hard. The dancing arena is circular where all the musicians sit together with their instruments on one side. The musicians include six or seven people, one of them plays shehnai (wind instrument), two of them play dholak (cylindrical drum played with a stick and bare hands) and there could be three or four dhamsa (kettle drum). The musicians playing dholak also participate in the dance, move around in the dancing arena and play the instruments while rhythmically swaying their bodies and thus giving the tempo and the beat, moving along with the main dancers. There is no decoration of the stage nor any stage property. If it becomes essential to show any garden scene or if the actors happen to pick some flowers, then some of the assistants might go and cut a branch of a big tree, bring it and hold it in front of the dancers. The audience sit on the bare ground and encircle the enclosure but there is special seating arrangement for the women. The women with their children in arm, occupy their seats on temporary raised platform of about six or seven feet. As the platform is made a slightly higher than the men's height, the male members of the audience can stand or sit beneath this platform. When there is a dance, other villagers and ritual relations like phul or male friends and sai or female friends are invited and entertained with feasts in the village.

The performance starts around 10 P.M. in the night and continues for the whole night and if necessary, it may also continue for an hour or two in the following morning after sunrise. At the beginning of the performance, musicians appear in the enclosure and display their talent for a considerable period of time. The two drummers dance as they play their instruments in great excitement, sometimes reciting the stroke sounds of the music vocally. The sound of the drum make people in the village aware that the performance is going to start soon and they flock in numbers around the dancing enclosure.

Before the actual performance starts, all the members of a party would appear ritualistically into the dancing arena. The person in front holds the mask of Lord Ganesha. Behind him a number of people carry all the masks available with the party arranged in order and fixed with a stick, followed by a group of musicians. The dancers

follow the musicians and behind them the patrons of the dance in the village. This procession encircles the dancing arena a number of times. After some time, everybody except the musicians leaves the enclosure. The musicians stop playing and sit on four sides of the enclosure. After this preliminary ritual a vocalist appears on the enclosure with folded palms and sings a brief invocation to Lord Ganesha, who according to tradition is worshipped before any auspicious work is undertaken. Incidentally, this is the only part of Chho performance where a detailed song is sung in jhumur style. The style of rendering the song is tribal in character. As soon as the vocalist stops, the drummers begin to beat their drums loudly and music for the night's performance starts. The invocation of Ganesha has various themes attached with it, and the story-line may be in complete contradiction with the traditional Sanskrit scriptures.

When the vocalist withdraws, the drummers change the rhythms, it becomes faster, exiting. The cylindrical drummers move towards the entry, their eyes glaring into the darkness as though conjuring someone coming into the arena. Then suddenly from out of the darkness gleaming and jingling in white, silver and black, Ganesha appears at the farthest corner of the corridor. He takes a long pause spreading his two natural hands. He has however four hands, two of which are made of wood and adjusted from his back and are constantly raised upwards. He takes a long and tedious pause with his face covered with a mask of Ganesha and costumes befitting his character. After a while, Ganesha suddenly runs dancing to the enclosure and starts his dance keeping time very rigidly with the beats of the drum. He is followed by other characters and is confronted with dramatic situations within a short time. This invariably forms the opening theme of each and every performance throughout the district of Purulia. If there are two or more troupes performing at one place there would be two or more invocations to Ganesha. This ritual characteristic is maintained even in this age of commercialization though the other ritual characteristics of the dance are slowly being neglected. Earlier, only the bhaktas or the devotees who used to maintain ritual cleanliness and keep fast were allowed to dance. The bhaktas used to dance in front of the Shiva temple during the lean agricultural season before the onset of monsoon. Now, anybody can learn the technique of the dance and participate in it. Earlier, when the theme of Ramayana was taken up, the performance could not be completed until the demon Ravana is killed by Rama and no member of the audience would leave the dancing enclosure before the completion of the performance; before the destruction of the evil forces and the ritual rehabilitation of the good is done.

The Mask

In Chho dance every character, divine, human or animal must appear with mask, appropriate for its identification. The masks are made in Chorda village in Bagmundi police station. There is one family in Dumurdih village in Jaipur P.S. of Purulia district who also make mask but the artisans in Chorda are the main producers of mask in this region. Masks are made by a class of artisans who are caste Hindus and are well versed in the episodes of Ramayana, Mahabharata and Purana. Their knowledge is traditional and hereditary and is not based on individual learning. The ingredients and the tools for making the masks are very simple. They are as follows: clay collected from the bed of a nearby hill stream, torn pieces of paper, torn pieces of cloth or rag, glue made of flour, small chisels, small hammers made of wood, scissors and clay of different shades, ingredients for decoration purchased from the local market etc.

The Technique

Chho is a complete mask dance. The presence of mask removes the face as a dramatic instrument and the emphasis is on bodily configurations. The dancers use intricate body gestures to communicate the bhava or the sentiment of each dramatic situation. The use of masks forces the performer to communicate the sentiment of a particular dramatic situation through their bodies rather than through the facial expressions. As the reviewer of London Times, Mr. John Percival commented; "Soon, I suppose, someone will start teaching these dancers from Bengal, some Western tricks of theatrical presentation.... But the lack of sophistication is part of their appeal. So whoever polishes their show had better leave it as simple as possible."

Purulia Chho dance might have started as a magic dance, transformed itself into a martial dance, imbibed certain elements of folk dances in the region and got fused with some of the basic stances of Indian classical dance. All these make Chho dance powerful, vigorous, intriguing and complex.

Mask Dances in Korea

Masks in Korea can be categorized in two kinds: religious masks and artistic masks. Some masks are enshrined in shaman shrines and revered with periodical offering rites. Religious masks were used to expel evil spirits like Pangsangshi. Artistic masks were

mostly used in dance and drama. Mask dances in Korea are called Talchum, Sandae, Ogwangdae and Yayu. Masks were believed to drive away malicious spirits, diseases and fearsome animals. Their purposes were, to ward off all evils; to manifest supernatural beings; to honor the deceased and to represent totemic animals. Korean mask dances evolved from dances, music and dramas performed during court ceremonies; during Buddhist ceremonies held to pray for peace and the well-being of the people and during the shaman rites held to ward off evils. Sanye, a masked dance drama reached Shilla from India through Central Asia and China. In India various lion and tiger dances are performed during ceremonies. Lion and tiger masks ward off evil forces. Bongsan Talchum developed in the Haeseo area and Songpa developed in the Songpa area.

Important element of Talchum is the unity created between the performers and the audience. Talchum is a vestige of fertility rights. The dominant themes of the mask dances and dramas are: first to relieve the anger of the commoners against the ruling class. Second to make fun of the debauched monks, third to expose the relationship between the husband, wife and the concubine and fourth to encourage virtue and punish vice. Talchum is a mask dance accompanied by songs. Common people criticized and ridiculed the upper class through lyrics.

There are about thirteen different types of Talchum. Bongsan Talchum and Songpa Talchum are most well-known.

Different types of Masks in Korea

Yangju Pyolsandae Nori : Yangju Pyolsandae Nori is performed in Seoul and Kyonggi-do Province. It also represents sandae mask dance drama. The drama has been performed on Buddha's birthday, the spring festival on the 5th day of the 5th lunar month, the Harvest Full-Moon Festival called Ch'usok, and on other gala days or in religious and shaman rites including a communal prayer ritual for rain.

Yangju Pyolsandae Nori consists of a Prologue (procession and sacred offering to spirits), eight acts and eight scenes, and an Epilogue embellished with chinogwi-gut, a shaman rite to appease angry spirits. The full cast of characters here is 32, but 22 masks are used as follows: the High Priest (two masks), the Pockmarked Face Monk, Wanbo (another old monk), Shinjubu (an acupuncturist), Waejangnyo (an old female entertainer), the Dark-Faced Old Monk, Somu (a concubine, two masks), Malttugi (the servant), the Monkey, Ch'wibari (a roving bachelor), Saennim (a nobleman), the Patrol Officer, Grandpa Shin, and Grandma Miyal.

T'ongyong Ogwangdae : The style of the T'ongyong Ogwangdae and Yaryu mask dances have prevailed around the lower reaches of the Nakdong River in Kyongsangnam-do Province. The performance has many analogies to other mask dance dramas. It comprises a great number of dances and adds comic dialogue, songs, and acting. T'ongyong Ogwangdae It is composed of five acts and some dances accompanied by three rhythmic beats adapted from shaman ritual. Ogwangdae and yaryu mask dance dramas are the finest examples of making fun of the ruling class as a weapon in class conflict.

Ogwangdae literally means "five clowns." Some interpret this as referring to Obangshinjang-mu, the Dance of the Five Generals of the Five Directions.

The cast of characters in the T'ongyong Ogwangdae is 31, which is the number of masks plus a baby doll.

Bongsan Talchum developed in the Haeseo area and Songpa developed in the Songpa area. Talchum is an important Korean inheritance. Important element of Talchum is the unity created between the performers and the audience. Red, black, white and other primal colors are used. The colors also signify the sex and age of the characters. A old person's mask is black, that of a young man is red, that of young woman is white. Young always wins over the old. Talchum is a vestige of fertility rights. Chho mask dance also invokes fertility rites in an agricultural society.

Traditional stringed and percussion instruments are used in Korean mask dances. Costumes are colorful befitting the characters. Performances are done mostly outdoors. Actors deliver their lines with much emotions and body language. This brings the wooden masks to life and involve the audience in the actions of the drama. In Korean mask dances, the common people vent their frustrations through comic dramatization of everyday social situations. Lively dance accompanied by vigorous music from three string and six wind and percussion instruments are the major components of mask dance performances. The performers and audience fill their lives with a collective experience of ecstasy. Today mask dances are a part of Korea's rich and colorful heritage.

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