

# The Gate of Words:

## Language in the Rituals of Korean Shamans

Research >  
Korea

In the context of globalization in the twenty-first century it may seem incongruous to speak of shamanism as a significant phenomenon in such a highly developed, industrial nation as (South) Korea. If one tends to associate shamanism with 'primitive culture', it will be a surprise to discover that in and around the metropolis of Seoul the rituals of the shamans (*mudang*) are very much in demand, because many people consider them an effective way to cope with the material and spiritual needs of modern society. Consequently shamans – who incidentally in most cases are women, as are their clients – still play an active role in Korea. Mediating between the world of gods and ancestors and that of humans, they perform rituals that are intended to resolve all kinds of problems and bring people happiness, health, and affluence in their present life.



An emotional encounter between the client and her deceased mother, who has entered the body of the shaman.

Antonetta L. Bruno

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When between 1987 and 1999 I observed the rituals of Korean shamans, I wanted to find out what actually transpires during a ritual, how exactly the shamans manage to turn it into an event that provides satisfaction to their clients, making the ritual efficacious. The answer to such questions ultimately sheds light on the astonishing survival of rituals that, in the eyes of many, seem pre-modern.

It has been my approach to obtain a reading of Korean shamanic rituals and divination practised by shamans, by focusing on the varieties of language (both ritual language and ordinary language) used in these contexts, concentrating on what the participants said, and relating their speech behaviour to their actions. Fundamental to this methodology, which was inspired by sociolinguistics and the so-called 'ethnography of speaking', was extensive fieldwork during which I made audio and video recordings of complete rituals. After preparing transcriptions of the tapes I analysed the speech of the visible and invisible participants (shamans and the supernatural entities speaking through them, clients, and audience) as a means to enter into the intricate network of communication that is established among the participants. In this stage of my research I explored Korean shamanic practices penetrating into the speech behaviour of participants by the application of linguistic tools such as Speech Act Theory, the analysis of speech direction, and the switching of speech levels, while I bestowed particular attention to the strategic usage of speech direction and switching phenomena within both symmetric and asymmetric relationships and to apparent inconsistencies with other grammatical features. My final aim was to furnish an analytical insight into the function and variety of language in the religious context.

Early on I had realized that the domain of investigation should not be confined to settings that may be narrowly defined as 'religious' (the 'formal' parts of the ritual), but should include the occasions on which the participants engaged in chatting, for instance during

pauses in a ritual (the 'informal' parts of the ritual), and therefore I always left the tape recorder running, even when nothing particular seemed to happen. The inclusion of the informal parts as the object of ritual analysis is essential for several reasons. To begin with, these informal parts function as bridges between the different levels of understanding that the various participants have with respect to the ritual. The extension of the concept of the ritual setting to events that are often considered not to be part of it also more clearly brings out the strategy used by shamans in order to make their words and actions meaningful. Only when I considered both the formal and informal parts of a ritual did I obtain a full view of the procedure of recycling (technically referred to as 're-contextualization') by the shaman in divine oracles (*kongsu*) of information that was touched upon earlier during the informal parts, and on the re-elaboration of the content of *kongsu* in informal conversation during subsequent pauses.

Although all forms of language related to the rituals are of importance, I have devoted special attention to *kongsu* because of its crucial function in the actions of the shamans and its particular significance to the participants. Acquiring the ability to deliver *kongsu* – in the words of the shamans themselves, 'opening the Gate of Words' – is in the final analysis what makes a shaman a true shaman, a religious practitioner able to serve and attract clients. My scrutiny of the linguistic features used in *kongsu* also shed light on the frequent switching of identity of the shaman and on the nature of possession in Korea. I found that even though it is generally assumed that in *kongsu* it is simply a divinity or spirit that addresses the believers, within a single *kongsu* the shaman usually constantly changes her (or his) identity. The speech levels the shaman used indicated that at one moment she was talking down to the clients as a numinous being, but the next moment reverted to her own, more humble identity as a shaman, only to speak again as a god in the next sentence. Her 'possession' turned out to be intermittent, a constant coming and going rather than a stable condition. Thus linguistic features proved to be a useful basis to define the altered state of consciousness that occurs among Korean shamans. It also became obvious to me that *kongsu* cannot always be accurately described – as is often done – as a dialogue

between the deity/shaman and the client only. Frequently a third person, another shaman, is involved, who acts as an interpreter in both directions. The result is a much more complex pattern of communication, which offers more opportunities to convey the message effectively to the client, and adapt it to her needs, and therefore contributes to the success of the ritual.

After I had charted the various patterns of communication I finally analysed the way in which strategic manipulation of words and actions by the shaman during *kongsu* and divination makes rituals and fortune telling efficacious in terms of an emotional transformation of the participants. It is in *kongsu* that the problems of the clients are addressed most directly and the performative utterances of the shaman are most effective in comforting and reassuring them. Recurring phrases such as 'I help you', 'I support you', 'Don't worry', 'Bear this in mind', and 'I assist you' are speech acts, which by themselves have the potential to produce a certain effect. The constant repetition of the same phrases affects the receiver, convincing her that her problems will be resolved, making her feel better by the end of the ritual. In *kongsu* the re-contextualization of information received in informal contacts between shamans and clients, which I frequently observed, also contributes to making rituals efficacious. When the gods reveal past and future, the content of their words is not abstract, but uniquely real and personal to the client. This personalization of the content affects the client emotionally, reassuring her even more that she can count on support and assistance.

This drove me to the conclusion that emotion is a determinant factor for the success of a ritual and a yardstick to measure whether it has been efficacious. The contrast between the emotions that the client experiences at the beginning and at the end of the ritual is related to a switching from passive to active participation. In the rituals, I have seen silent and absent-minded clients, who did not respond to the overtures of the shaman, gradually being transformed into active participants who engaged in dialogues with beings from the other world and shared joy, tears, and laughter with those present. It is in this way, and to a large extent through verbal strategies, that the aims of the rituals of Korean shamans are achieved. <

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Triangular communication: from left to right, the client, the assistant-shaman, and the deity speaking through the mouth of a shaman.



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