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**Buddhist Ritual Music and Dance**

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Buddhism is believed to have entered Korea in about 371 A.D. from north China. In the years following its introduction, ritual music and dance played a vital role in intensifying religious experience in Buddhist ceremonies. These ceremonies, such as the Yongsan-je, which are highly colorful, elaborate, and costly (at one time some required as many as four or five days to perform in their entirety), are held largely to prepare the devotee for entrance into Nirvana, or Paradise, or the “Pure Land” as it is referred to in Korea, after death by purification of the past life. The Yongsan-je is specifically held as a memorial tribute in which devotees pray for the peaceful passage of the deceased person’s soul into paradise and is designed to lead human beings to the “Pure Land” through the re- enactment of Buddha’s “sermon on the mount,” so to speak. The “mounf, in this case is Yongsan, a sacred mountain in India known as Gridhra-kuta located northeast of Rajagrha, capital of Magadha in central India, which is said to be shaped like the head of a vulture, and is famous for its vultures and its caverns inhabited by ascetics. It is where Pisuna (Mara), in the shape of a vulture, hindered the meditations of Ananda.

Among other large-scale Buddhist ceremonies in Korea are the Kak- bae-je, which is held in praise of the Ten Kings or Gods of Hell who sit in judgment of departed souls, and the Suryuk-je (the “Land and Water Ceremony”), which is held to propitiate the spirits of the land and water deities and to pray for the souls of those who have met death by accidental drowning. The word je means “ceremony,” and is the equivalent of upasadra in Sanskrit.

Over the years, however, due largely to the rising expenditures involved in the execution of these rites, large-scale Buddhist ceremonies in Korea have been increasingly on the wane—so much so in fact that[page 24] many of the monks and nuns, particularly the novices, are being denied the practice and training needed to carry out these lengthy proceedings. Consequently, many portions of these ceremonies are gradually being forgotten, and, along with them, the accompanying songs and dances. Today, there are only four aging monks, all of whom have been designated “Human Cultural Treasures” by the Korean government, who are capable of conducting the Yongsan-je in its entirety.

In addition, these large-scale ceremonies with their accompanying sacred songs and dances are largely to be seen only at the temples where the sect of married monks, known as taech’osung, who belong to the T’aego-jong order, officiate. Celibate monks, known as pigusung, who belong largely to the Chogye-jong order and constitute the majority in Korea, have done away with all dances, accompanying musical instruments, and practically all the sacred songs in order to disassociate themselves from Shamanism, and largely employ only recitative chants instead. As Shamanism itself assimilated with Buddhism in the course of transmission throughout Korea’s long history, its ritual dances and songs adopted some of the Buddhist elements, although only superficially and for purely decorative purposes, in order to appeal more to the general populace.

The Buddhism of Northeast Asia, comprising Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan, is called Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) Buddhism, whereas that of Southeast Asia is called Hinayana (“Lesser Vehicle”) Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism has been a major influence in East Asian countries, but Korea is believed to be the only one today in which Buddhist ritual dance is still practiced. In the case of Tibet, however, though Buddhist ritual dances are still preserved, as was evidenced by a performance given in Korea in 1992 by a group of Tibetan monks who presently reside in Ladakh, India, they are of a different nature than whose per-formed in Korea; that is, they employ several types of mask dances, which, today, are not to be found in Korean Buddhist sacred dances. On the other hand, Korean mask dance dramas are believed to be of Central Asian origin, and, at the time of their import during the Silla period, they were performed as Buddhist ritual dance dramas. It is thus possible that Tibetan and Korean masques share a common origin, but more research is still required to fully bear this out.

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The song form used in the Korean Buddhist ceremony, both by itself and for the accompaniment of the dances, is known as pomp’ae (Sanskrit: brahma-bhan; Chinese: fanbei; Japanese: pombai). The pomp’ae of Hinayana and Mahayana are sung differently. These songs, sung in praise of Buddha, serve to calm the mind within by repressing the world without. They originated in India, the birthplace of Buddhism, were brought into China, where they are said to have subsequently been developed during the 3rd century A.D., and were later transmitted to Korea and Japan. Although Buddhism is believed to have entered Korea in about 371, various sources list the emergence of pomp’ae in Korea to be as late as 645 (other sources state that it was brought into Korea during the Silla period from Tang Dynasty China by Zen Master Chin-gam, who lived from 774 to 850). By the early part of the 9th century, however, the musical style of these songs had been altered to adapt them to the Korean idiom, and the dances are believed to have undergone a similar alteration from their Indian prototype some 650 years ago during the latter part of the Koryo period.

The Korean pomp’ae comprises two basic styles of singing: chissori and hossori. The latter, meaning “simple chant,” makes up the great majority of the repertory. Its texts are usually quatrains of Chinese verses in lines of five or seven syllables. The chissori, meaning “elaborate chant,” has the most extraordinary melismas and a tone that ranges from a deep basso profundo all the way up to falsetto singing. It is not confined to any limitation of time, and can be prolonged or abridged in accordance with the requirements of the ceremony.

In Korea, the pomp’ae texts, employed in the accompaniment to the dance are written in Chinese characters and are based on Chinese verse meter, the only exception being the Ch’onsugyong (“Dharani of the Great Compassionate One”), which is written and sung in the original Sanskrit. Dharani are magical formulas, mystic forms of prayer, or spells of Tan-trie order, written is Sanskrit. They were found in China as early as the 3rd century A.D. and formed a portion of the Dharani-pitaka Sutra.

The accompanying instrumental music employed in the ceremony, collectively referred to as chorach’i, is performed on instruments that were formerly used in royal military processional music during the Choson Dynasty, as are the distinctive yellow robes and stovepipe-shaped [page 26] hats worn by the musicians. The only instruments that the monks themselves play in the singing of the pomp’ae and in chanting are the large gong, round drum, and a wooden slitgong, or temple block, known as the mokt’ak. However, in smaller-scale ceremonies where the musicians are not present, the conical oboe, the only melodic instrument of the ensemble, is played by the monks themselves, but the clarion, shell trumpet, or conch, and small cymbals are not used.

The Yongsan-je begins with the shiryon, a ritual in which the temple area is purified. This is carried out by all participants—monks, nuns, musicians, and devotees—who parade around the temple area with the musicians taking the lead, followed by monks bearing various standards and the yon, an ornately decorated palanquin believed to contain the spirit of the deceased. The devotees, with hands folded together in prayer, constitute the remainder of the procession. The music played is that of Tae Ch’wi-t’a, mentioned previously.

As the procession slowly makes its way back to the immediate temple area facing the main hall, a closed circle is formed in the center of which one or two, or sometimes four, monks or nuns perform the chak-bop (literally “Creating the Dharma”), or, as it is more commonly known, the “Butterfly Dance.” Of all Buddhist sacred dances, this might well be considered the most representative, the most leading in importance, and the most noted for its beauty of form and movement. It is the ultimate in grace, subtlety, and restraint, emulating the ethereal movements of the butterfly, from whence it derives its name.

The dancers are dressed in a Jong flowing white robe with extremely broad sleeves that hang from the shoulder to the floor along the entire length of the arm which resemble the wings of a butterfly. A bright red mantle, known as the kasa, is worn across the chest and over one shoulder; across the other are long strips of material in different colors that are representative of the O-haeng (“Five Colors”) cosmology, mentioned previously, wnich is actually Taoist in origin, one example of the admixture of Taoism and Buddhism in Korea. On their heads, the dancers wear tall pointed hoods made of hemp cloth bearing sacred Sanskrit letters, and in each hand they usually hold a lotus flower made of paper.

To the beating of the large gong and drum, and the singing of the hossori pomp’ae entitled Toryangge (the “Gatha of Bodhimandala,” the[page 27] gatha being a song, a metrical narrative, or hymn of moral purport, generally composed of thirty-two characters, and the Bodhimandala a place for teaching, learning, or practicing religion), sung as the circle of monks and devotees slowly begins to revolve around the confines of the temple courtyard, the dancers execute the movements in a slow, stately manner in an unmetered, free rhythmic style that is, if executed in the correct manner, totally dependent on the words of the song, which are translated as follows:

The Bodhimandala is pure and clean with no defilement.

Triratna [the “Triple Treasure” or “Three Precious Ones,”

namely Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha] and Devas descend

to this place.

Now, as I recite these wonderfully true words,

May you protect me with Your great mercy.

At the start of the dance, the heel of the left foot is raised slightly, touching the right foot between the instep and the ankle joint. At the same time, the knees are bent, as in a balletic plier, while the upright posture of the body is maintained. In no other type of Korean traditional dance can this posture be found, and if one were asked the main difference between the Buddhist dance and other forms of dance in Korea, he could easily point to this figuration. It is the position that is assumed at the start, the position to which the dancer returns after each series of movements, and the position which brings the dance to a close, not only in the Butterfly Dance, but in all sacred Buddhist dances, the only possible exception being that of the Drum Dance (but, even here, though the dancer doesn’t return to this position after each series of movements, it is the one that he assumes at the start).

The Butterfly Dance conveys different meanings through the use of symbols. Some movements and figures symbolize abstract Buddhist concepts, such as Compassion (gathering and then parting the hands), Conversion to Buddhism (bending the body like a bow and then straightening it), and Perfection (going round and round, making a circle).

One of the most strikingly beautiful and impressive figures is found in a variation of the dance where the performer sinks slowly to the ground in a gentle swaying motion, causing the outstretched arms to[page 28] move up and down very slightly in alternation. It brings to mind the picture of a butterfly alighted on a flower, its wings swaying in the soft breeze—an aesthetic interaction between nature and the dance that one so often finds in Asia.

In another variation, the dancers once again sink slowly to the ground, first in a squatting and then gradually to a sitting position, their backs to each other, and execute rapid changes in position by lifting themselves on their haunches and turning. The great difficulty entailed in performing this feat may be realized when one considers the length and bulk of the costumes and the fact that the arms are held continually in an outstretched position.

The Butterfly Dance has fourteen variants, but all of them are based on eleven essential dance movements, six of which are commonly performed at present-day rituals.

The Butterfly Dance is accompanied by the large gong and conical oboe, which plays a melody called Yombul (“Buddhist Invocation”). This is composed of an introduction and two parts, and has no melodic relationship whatsoever to the pomp’ae (the “Gatha of Bodhimandala”) that is sung at the same time. If one questions the monks about this, they simply say, “It is the relatedness of the unrelated,” or “It is the inter-relationship of unrelated things,” which, of course, lies at the root of Zen Buddhist concept.

Another most unusual and interesting dance that employs two dancers dressed in the butterfly costume is the T’aju, the “Dance of the Eightfold Path.” It is performed prior to the offering of food to the Buddha as a sort of “grace” in the final section of the Yongsan-je called the Shik-tang Chak-bop, the so-called “Sacred Communal Meal,” in which both monks and devotes alike participate. Each dancer carries what might be taken for a croquet stick, a long thin wooden-tipped mallet decorated with tightly wound, brightly colored strips of paper—the same five colors, in fact, that are worn by the dancer. In the center of the dance area is an eight-sided block of wood called the P’alchongdo (the “Eight-fold Path”) painted white and bearing large black letters in Chinese that symbolize the teachings of the Buddha. On top of the wooden block at the center is painted the letter Shim (“Heart” or “Mind,” more specifically the “Buddha Mind”), and around it along the eight sides are such [page 29] words as “Righteous Opinion,” “Righteous Judgment,” “Righteous Thought,” and “Righteous Life.” The dancers circle the block slowly in a swaying motion, stopping at intervals to strike the top of it with their mallets. The eight sides of the block represent the eight kinds of righteousness into which one should become enlightened.

Upon completion of the Butterfly Dance, two or four monks or nuns perform the Cymbal Dance (called Para Ch’um in Korean) to the accom-paniment of the pomp’ae entitled Chonsugyong (the “Dharani of the Great Compassionate One”). As mentioned previously, this is sung entirely in Sanskrit. In the dance, a large cymbal is carried in each hand and twirled adroitly back and forth over the head. The dancers are dressed in the grey-colored frock and red mantle normally worn by monks; that is, of course, if they haven’t performed the Butterfly Dance previously, in which case they would still be dressed in the butterfly costume, but without the hood. This dance is performed in a faster tempo than that of the Butterfly Dance, and a continuous triple meter rhythm is played on the round drum and gong throughout. The accompanying instrumental music, a very short piece that is repeated over and over, bears the title of Ch’onsu Para. Like the Yombul, it is also played on the conical oboe and bears no melodic relationship to the pomp’ae that is being sung. There are six varieties of this dance in all.

It is said that the purpose of the dance is to cleanse all evil from the heart and mind, and to purify both the place of worship and the soul of the departed as well. It is also said that this dance originally celebrated the triumphal entry of Buddha into Tosol Castle after his enlightenment.

In addition to the T’aju, another dance that is executed prior to the “Sacred Communal Meal” is the Pop-ko (“Drum Dance”), which is performed before a large round temple drum set on a pedestal, with drumheads on both sides that measure about two feet in diameter, by a single dancer carrying a drumstick in each hand and dressed in the grey-colored frock and red mantle normally worn by monks; that is, of course, if he hasn’t performed the T’aju previously, in which case he would still be dressed in the butterfly costume, but without the hood.

Of all traditional dances in Korea, this is one of the most exacting, and requires extreme physical endurance to execute. Before the start of the dance, rapid rhythms are played on the center and rim of the drum,[page 30] giving off a thunderous sound that can be heard far in the distance. During the performance of the dance itself, a second monk stands at the opposite side of the drum beating out a steady 2/4 rhythm with a single drumstick or mallet that is gradually accelerated until a very rapid speed is attained. Another monk can be seen to the rear of the drum, standing before a wooden fish suspended from a wooden frame or a sheet of white paper on which the figure of a fish is painted in black ink. With two sticks, decorated like those used in the T’aju, he beats on the fish in continual alternating motion in time with the dance. This is referred to as the Mogd Ch’um (the “Dance of the Wooden Fish”). The music accompanying the dance is played on the conical oboe and is basically the same as that played during the Cymbal Dance. Here, however, it is gradually accelerated to a very rapid tempo in accordance with that of the dance. The dance becomes most difficult when the drum is played, both in the center and on the rim, from a backbend position, a technique that calls for both skill and dexterity.

It should be mentioned here that the folk version of this dance, called the Sung-mu (“Buddhist Monk Dance”), mentioned previously, also has a section where the performer executes rapid rhythms on the drum. This is wrongly interpreted by some dancers, however, to be a phenomenon whereby a monk, restricted by an ascetic life of celibacy and abstinence, is able to vent his frustrations by pounding away on a drum. This might be acceptable from a modern psychological standpoint, but, in reality, it is rather more of wishful thinking on the part of the interpreter than anything else. For any monk or nun to do so would be regarded as an extreme aberration. In the temple, both the large drum and the wooden fish are kept in a special pavilion. When the acolytes beat the drum and fish up and down three times, the elder monks come to the table to take their meal. When all the monks are seated, the acolytes beat the drum and fish up and down five times. Herein lies the significance of the drum playing in the sacred Buddhist drum dance, from which the folk version is taken.

The most representative, as well as the most interesting, of all chissori pomp’ae is that which is called Koryong-san, the “Vulture Spirit Peak.” It is sung during the Yongsan-je when a large scroll painting of the Buddha and his disciples is unfurled and hoisted onto two tall poles in the [page 31] temple courtyard. Though it is classified as a chissori p6mp’ae, it actually opens in the hossori style with a piece called Songja, the words of which refer to the arrival of the Sakyamuni Buddha at Yongsan Mountain, mentioned previously. The second part, called San-hwarak, meaning “Scattered Flowers Falling from Heaven,”consists of nine syllables: Na-Mu-Yong-San Hoe-Sang-Pul-Bo Sal, which mean, “I devote myself entirely to all the Buddhas and Boddhisatvas assembled on the Vulture Spirit Peak.” These syllables are repeated twice in the form of a melodic recitative called Ko-ch’ae-bi, also in hossori style. Then, after the large gong has been struck several times, the chissori begins, in which the same nine syllaoles are sung, but so slowly, along with many vowel changes, that they cannot be recognized. The singing of these nine syllables in chissori style takes about forty-five minutes to perform, and the melismatic effect is essentially ecstatic, to say the least, ranging in tone from a deep basso profoundo all the way up to a falsetto. The sliding tones sometimes convey an effect that is likened to the soft howling of the wind. This chissori pomp’ae, one of the most unique vocal art mediums of the world, is the source from which the chamber music-style suite, Yongsan Hoesang, was created.