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To cite this article: Kirsten Bell (2003) The Gendering of Religious Experience: Ecstatic Trance in Cheondogyo, *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 9:2, 7-35, DOI: [10.1080/12259276.2003.11665946](https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2003.11665946)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2003.11665946>



Published online: 04 Jan 2016.



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The Gendering of Religious Experience: Ecstatic Trance in Cheondogyo

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Keywords

New Religious Movements (NRMs); ecstatic trance; spirit possession; female subordination; I. M. Lewis

Abstract

Cheondogyo is a Korean religion which espouses a central doctrine that has often been labelled 'radically egalitarian.' However, although religious ideologies emphasize gender equality, in practice these themes are translated in ways that seem to limit women's access to power. These gender differences are most apparent in ecstatic trance, which occurs reasonably often during religious training sessions. While legitimized by the religion's founder as a key source of spiritual enlightenment, the more boisterous forms of ecstatic trance are viewed with hostility. Because these forms of trance are exclusive to women, this condemnation of ecstatic trance becomes a condemnation of a largely female expression of religiosity. Moreover, ecstatic trance is seen to confirm a female affinity for instinctive spirituality, which deems them unsuitable for the types of leadership positions currently dominated by men.

Introduction

In the past few decades several important ethnographic studies have appeared on gender and religion in Korea.¹ These publications have been critical in redressing and correcting stereotypes about Korean women and their role in Korean religious life. However, to date little has been written on gender in the new religions of Korea. Considering the multiplicity of new religions in the country, this seems a significant oversight. The main exception to this general paucity is Lowney's (1992) examination of gender in Tongilgyo (the Unification Church). However, she treats Tongilgyo not as a Korean religion, but a pseudo Christian one.

With this in mind, I would like to draw attention to gender in Cheondogyo. This religion poses an interesting contrast to these earlier studies. While Cheondogyo exhibits strong similarities to other religious traditions in the country, it also manifests certain differences, which relate to the specificities of Cheondogyo theory and practice. Beyond the Korean cultural context, this study is concerned with larger issues relating to the role of women in religious life and, in particular, their attraction to ecstatic religious experience. My examination of the particularities of trance in Cheondogyo offers a contribution to this broader intellectual discussion.

Spiritual Training and Ecstatic Trance

Spiritual training (*sudo* or *suryeon*) is a central component of Cheondogyo religiosity. At least once a year, the more conscientious adherents visit a religious training centre (*sudowon*) and spend a week there in intensive training.² This comprises a rigorous schedule of chanting, meditation, religious lectures and scriptural study. During fieldwork in the summer of 2002, I attended such sessions at the Yongdam training centre just outside the town of Gyeongju. The Cheondogyo Women's Association (*Yeoseonghoe*) organized this

particular trip, and most of the adherents in attendance were members of this association from all over the country.

Into the fourth day of training a quite memorable occurrence took place. While I should emphasize that this event was out of the ordinary, it nevertheless provides an important window into many of the issues explored in this paper. I have therefore provided a much condensed excerpt from my field-notes to furnish a picture of what took place.

2 August 2002, 9:19 a.m. *hyeonsong* (loud chanting). Approximately one hundred of us are seated in disorderly rows, thin cushions providing our only relief from the hard linoleum floor. The two ceiling fans blow a desultory breeze through the air, which is already hot, despite the relatively early hour. There are about ninety-five women in the room, all dressed in comfortable clothing. Most are middle-aged and many are well into their sixties. There are five males scattered throughout the room.

One person commences chanting, and everyone follows at their own pace. The overall effect is discordant and remarkably loud, and the room is soon reverberating with sound. Immediately a few people start moving their shoulders and arms up and down lightly. The woman sitting in front of me is rocking to and fro. She starts crying softly and covers her face with her handkerchief. She then goes back to rocking from side to side.

At this point, my attention is drawn by two middle-aged women over to the left who are chanting especially loudly and moving their upper bodies more vigorously than those around them. I have noticed these two women on previous occasions. They are friends and often sit together during the training sessions. The younger of the two is chanting particularly energetically, although she dies down after a while. Suddenly, the volume and intensity of her chanting and movement increases noticeably. She is springing from the floor and chanting in an extremely loud fashion.

Apparently, I am not the only one to notice. A few other people have been distracted by the noise and look around to determine its source. At this moment, the woman's movement becomes so intense that she bounces forward and starts to drift towards the woman sitting in front of her. This woman, becoming aware of the impending collision, wisely decides it is

time to move out the way. Looking a little disgruntled, she picks up her cushion and moves to the back of the room, ultimately settling down next to me. Other bodies soon scatter, as the woman is still chanting and bouncing forward, propelled by her momentum.

Although many of the people to the rear of the room and off to the sides have been distracted by the trancing woman, they are otherwise unaffected. However, there has been an exodus from the middle of the room, leaving the trancing woman spatially isolated . . . well, almost. One man is now directly in her path, yet he is oblivious to the commotion behind him. It seems as if a collision is inevitable and, sure enough, moments later she crashes into him. What occurs next is more startling still, as the woman lifts her arms up and then starts beating his back with her closed fists.

At this point, most people in the training session have stopped chanting and are openly staring and pointing at the trancing woman. Meanwhile, the much abused man finally decides that it is time to move out the way. The trancing woman continues her circuit around the room in a clockwise motion. She moves about three meters in all, before coming to a halt. She is still chanting, but now she is crying also. Her chanting has become a long groan and tears are streaming down her face. Her eyes remain tightly shut the whole time.

The woman who was first inconvenienced by the trancing woman suddenly moves from her position up the back and returns to her original spot. She mutters something quietly to the trancing woman, who wakes up looking startled. She dries her eyes and moves back to her cushion. This interlude, from start to finish, has taken only a few minutes. Training then resumes as if nothing out of the ordinary has occurred.

At the end of the training session, the companion of the trancing woman leads her out to the front and she bows to the congregation. We all bow back and break into applause. No words of introduction are spoken or needed. There seems to be a clear consensus in the room that we have witnessed something remarkable. Just in case I am in any doubt, the woman sitting next to me leans over and whispers that the woman has experienced '*gangnyeong*' (ecstatic trance). On the way back to her seat, the woman stops

and apologizes to the man she beat while so deeply in trance. We all laugh and the atmosphere becomes light.

Several hours later, the supreme leader of Cheondogyo (*gyo-ryeong*), who just happens to be visiting, gives a lecture. The director of the training centre (*sudowonjang*) follows shortly after. Although their words are different, they both express the same idea. Both men comment that shaking and jumping are not appropriate behaviour. According to them, this is not real trance, but rather a kind of fever (*yeol*). The *sudowonjang*, demonstrating his comedic talents, parodies the actions of the woman we witnessed earlier. His caricature makes the audience laugh. Both men stress that it is important to take a moderate path and not to confuse such foolish ‘fever’ with legitimate spiritual experience.

I think this description provides some sense of the special relationship between women and trance in Cheondogyo—and the response it produces. It therefore raises many questions about the nature of gender and religiosity in Cheondogyo. Why did the woman go into trance? Why did the woman’s trance attract so much attention? Why were the religious leaders so offended by it? Why is it mainly women who go into trance? It is these questions I intend to explore in this paper.

Cheondogyo: History and Doctrine

On 5 April 1860 at the *Yongdam* pavilion on *Gumi* Mountain, a man named Choe Je-u fell into a trance, where his body was racked by a great trembling, a strange coldness settled over him, and he was seized by the spirit of Heaven (*Hanullim*). Choe would later describe his experience in the following way:

It was April, when I felt unexpectedly a coldness and trembling of my body and mind, and could not express the reason. I then heard a mysterious voice, which startled me. Then I questioned (the voice), and it said, “Fear

not; don't you know me, whom mankind calls God?" I asked him why he revealed himself to me. He replied, "I send you to this world to teach this precept; therefore, do not doubt" (Kim, 1992: 7).

This experience is significant for several reasons. First, it occurred at the very same spot where I witnessed the trancing woman 143 years later. Second, it was the moment that gave birth to a religion.

As a result of his revelation, Choe felt compelled to form a new religion which he named 'Donghak,' or Eastern Learning.³ He envisioned a new world order founded on human equality that would pave the way for a heavenly paradise on earth (*jisangcheonguk*). This early underlying egalitarianism has crystal-lized into the contemporary doctrine of *In Nae Cheon* (humans are Heaven), which has today become the cornerstone of the religion's theology.

Some exposition of this doctrine is necessary before continuing, as it is the key to understanding trance and its reception in Cheondogyo. Essentially, for Cheondogyo adherents there is an insoluble connection between humans and God. Unlike the vast distance separating the human and divine in orthodox Christianity, Cheondogyo theology recognizes the inherent divinity of all humans.⁴ Kim Yong Choon (1977), the main scholar writing on Cheondogyo philosophy today, states that in this religion God is pantheistic and immanent. In other words, God exists everywhere and in everything.

Yet, the God of Cheondogyo is also transcendent. In Choe's account of his religious conversion, he clearly describes a deity who speaks to him. It is also worth noting that Choe did not coin the phrase *In Nae Cheon*—that came much later. Rather, Choe's key doctrinal contribution was the idea that humans bear or serve God (*sicheonju*). It thus appears that the rationalization of Cheondogyo theology has led to shifts in the conception of God⁵. Today Cheondogyo bears certain similarities to both Christian and Buddhist notions of spirituality, although the finished product is different from both.

The notion of a transcendent yet immanent God may be puzzling to a western-trained scholar. How can God be both

immanent and transcendent? Cheondogyo adherents provide a simple explanation. They say that when we are born, our minds and God's mind overlap completely. Nevertheless, as we become absorbed in the mundane and impure world around us, we lose this unity and our Godliness becomes something *potential* rather than realized. Fortunately, through spiritual and moral cultivation people can realize their potential divinity and 'become God.'

I think it is worth quoting at length here from the prominent Cheondogyo theologian Yi Ton-hwa to help convey the meaning of *In Nae Cheon*. Yi writes:

The principle of *In Nae Cheon* (man and God are one) does not mean to imply that man's present mind and behavior are that of God. It means that man basically has the capacity to manifest the spirit of God. In other words, *In Nae Cheon* makes man a God. But this does not mean that man's present mind already possesses the mind of God. *In Nae Cheon* was conceived in order to make this world a paradise. But this does not mean that *In Nae Cheon* was created because the world has already become a paradise. Therefore, the prime task of *In Nae Cheon* is to achieve the original purpose of man by means of developing the quality of man.

Accordingly, there are two different elements in man. The one is the natural man, and the other the divine man which is buried deeply inside the natural man. What we call the natural man is the mind we now possess, and our present behavior is not man's true nature (Weems, 1964: 11).

A clear distinction is made between our present mind, which is separate from God, and our potential God-mind. Thus, rather than describing our present condition, *In Nae Cheon* expresses the way we *should* be. All humans possess this potential to recapture their Original nature through religious training and moral cultivation.

Critical to these processes of spiritual and moral cultivation is *jumun*, which is a magical incantation revealed to Choe Je-u during his religious experience in 1860. It consists of twenty-one Chinese characters—*ji gi geum ji weon wi dae gang shi cheon ju jo hwa jeong yeong se bul mang man sa ji*. The officially endorsed translation of *jumun* is, "Ultimate energy being here and now, I yearn for its great descent.

Bearing God, I have naturally become. Eternally not forgetting, I become aware of all” (Kim, 1977).

Jumun is the key to Cheondogyo. Adherents say that if you understand *jumun* you understand the Truth of the religion. However, the recitation of *jumun* is also an essential precursor to ecstatic trance. In other words, it is only through the former that the latter can be produced. For this reason, Choe Je-u endorsed the incantation as “the holy sentence that brings down the Heavenly Spirit” and urged his followers to repeat it ceaselessly so that they too might experience communion with God (Choi, 1963: 15). Therefore, it is *jumun* that leads adherents to their goal of *In Nae Cheon*.

Gender in Focus

Numerous scholars have commented on the radical egalitarianism of Donghak/Cheondogyo ideology and this doctrine of *In Nae Cheon*—especially considering the hierarchical and patriarchal Confucian society that produced it. Drawing on the discourses of modernity popular in Korea, Cheondogyo adherents themselves emphasize the “sexual equality” and “democratic basis” of their religion. However, is this concept of *In Nae Cheon* hostile to sexual inequality?

Although *In Nae Cheon* suggests an intrinsic connection between God and humans, regardless of sex, there are seen to be ‘natural’ differences between men and women. These so-called innate differences are understood as evidence that the sexes are suited to different roles and duties. Therefore, many Cheondogyo adherents feel that men and women should have complementary roles rather than strictly equal ones.

This emphasis on role complementarity is embedded in the Cheondogyo scriptures (*Dongkyeong Daejeon*); and while early leaders such as Choe Shi-hyeong were concerned with recognizing the value of women, the religion never made a real break from a Confucian-

style framework regarding gender roles. A general picture regarding the ‘correct’ relationship between men and women in Cheondogyo theology can be surmised by the following quote:

Ch’ondogyo affirms . . . the right relationship between husband and wife. It advocates that the duty of the wife is to love, respect and obey her husband. This is the right, beautiful and good custom of human society, which is to be maintained continually as an unchangeable norm of human ethics. Yet, at the same time, Ch’ondogyo believes in the fundamental equality of men and women, and teaches that the husband must not oppress and despise his wife, but must love, respect, and be gentle to her. Therefore, Ch’ondogyo attempts to correct the oppressive character of the husband in feudalistic ethics, while main-taining the order of authority between husband and wife in the home (Kim, 1977: 66).

Obviously, the role-complementarity that exists in Cheondogyo is understood as a form of equality—women and men are equal, but different.

Although at an ideological level women are equal to men, at a structural level, positions of religious authority are all occupied by men. The supreme leader of the religion, the *gyoryeong*, is always male. Indeed, when I have inquired about the possibility of a woman becoming *gyoryeong*, the most common response of informants—both male and female—is to laugh. There is a common perception that women do not have the qualities needed for this type of leadership position.

Gyogunjang, the directors of individual parishes, are also male. The same is true of those who instruct religious truth at the Christian-style Sunday services, and the spiritual training centers. It is important to note that theoretically women may fill these positions; officially there are no restrictions against employing females in this capacity. In this respect, Cheondogyo stands in marked contrast to Catholicism and the more conservative Protestant denominations. However, in practice it does not happen—*ever*—as far as I have been able to ascertain. The outcome of such beliefs is a situation wherein males

control formal religious knowledge and dominate the official hierarchy of the religion.

Trance in Focus

A further distinction between male and female roles in Cheondogyo is apparent in the realm of religious experience; nowhere is this more evident than in ecstatic trance. I have used the term ‘ecstatic trance’ to cover the range of ecstatic religious behaviors described at the beginning of this paper. However, as there has been some debate regarding the terms ‘trance,’ ‘possession,’ ‘possession trance’ and ‘altered states of conscious-ness,’ I think further clarification is needed.

As Bourguignon (1973) notes, the term trance refers both to a category of psycho-biological states manifested in an altered state of consciousness, and their cultural interpretation. She further distinguishes between two types of trance: possession trance and trance. Possession trance is understood to be an altered state of consciousness that is interpreted as the result of spirit possession. In other words, it is a condition in which a person is believed to be inhabited by the spirit of another person or a supernatural being. All other altered states of consciousness, not deemed to be caused by spirit possession, Bourguignon terms trance.

Although well intentioned, such clarifications often sit less comfortably with the realities of this phenomenon.⁶ The manifestations of trance and the meanings attributed in any given religious context differ greatly. This is certainly true of trance in Cheondogyo. There are multiple interpretations regarding what trance is, which seem to cut across the distinctions between ‘trance’ and ‘possession trance’ (and ‘possession’ as a separate conceptual category for that matter) making a single definition of the phenomenon difficult.

For example, many people agree that trance is “receiving God.” Interestingly, the Cheondogyo term for ecstatic trance, *gangnyeong*,

means “descent of the spirit.” Clearly, there is a strong feeling that people who experience *gangnyeong* are possessed by the spirit of God.⁷ This notion of the spirit descending has a legitimate precursor in the founder’s initial revelation from God. As we have seen, at this time his body trembled and he fell into a trance (Choi, 1963: 15). Several scholars have likened Choe’s trance at this time to a form of shamanic possession⁸ (Jorgensen, 1999; Kim, 1993).

However, although *gangnyeong* may be understood as a kind of possession by God, it can also be seen as a way of connecting with God. Through trance you plug into the universe and *gi*, or cosmic energy, is concentrated in your body. This explanation fits less well with the category of possession trance. Finally, *gangnyeong* may also be seen as a manifestation of your inner God-mind. Again, this does not fit the notion of possession trance particularly well. Ultimately, these varying interpretations of trance relate to the different representations of God in Cheondogyo: as a transcendent, pantheistic and immanent being.

Gangnyeong takes many forms. However, it is most commonly exhibited in shaking or convulsions racking the body. These vary in intensity from light shudders to the more extreme contortions of the trancing woman described at the beginning of this paper. As I hope my description also shows, trance is gendered. Statistics I have compiled on trance over the years reveal that about 80 percent of those who manifest symptoms of trance are female.⁹

Clearly, as 20 percent of those people I have recorded shaking are male, we are not dealing with a solely female phenomenon. However, just because men occasionally do it too, I think it would be a mistake to dismiss the gender dimension evident in Cheondogyo trance. To digress for a moment, even though there are some male shamans in Korea, this does not negate the fact that shamanism is a gendered form of religiosity in the country. I would strongly assert that the same is true for trance in Cheondogyo.

This is because the most intense forms of trance are only ever exhibited by women. These include crying and moaning, hair pulling and acts of more extreme self-mortification. For example, I have seen

women punching themselves so hard on their arms and legs that they cause massive purple bruising. I have seen women groaning as if they were dying and pulling at their hair. I have heard women punching themselves in the chest with their fists or punching themselves in the mouth. I have never seen men exhibit these forms of behaviour. Ultimately, the contrast between male trance and that exhibited by these women is so great that they hardly bear comparison. So my point is that while I have seen men go into trance, they do so rarely, and never to the same extremes of intensity.

Responses to Trance

As we have seen, trance is received with ambivalence. While some people embrace it as an expression of spiritual development, others are considerably less receptive. Nevertheless, I should point out that not all the people who condemn trance are male and not all the people who condone trance are female. Yet, there are some interesting patterns in people's attitudes towards trance. The clearest condemnation of ecstatic trance comes from the centre: Cheondogyo's central administration (*Jungang Chongbu*). So the question is, why do religious officials respond in this fashion? Why are they so generally hostile towards trance?

I believe that trance is threatening to the established religious hierarchy in Cheondogyo. I think this is true of all trance, male or female. Keeping in mind the proviso that trance expresses many meanings, in each case, trance is connected with spiritual perfection. As we have seen, through trance you are either being possessed by God, connecting with God, or manifesting your God-self. Therefore, when lay adherents who have no formal position in Cheondogyo go into trance it threatens the existing religious hierarchy.

Cheondogyo's central administration is not alone in its reaction to ecstatic religiosity and the perceived threat it entails. As Boddy (1994: 420) notes, the subversive potential of spirit movements is widespread and ensures that they are often suppressed and subject to

strict political controls. Indeed, the ethnographic record provides us with many examples of the role such movements have played in resisting European colonial values (e.g. Comaroff 1985; Brown, 2001), class and racial hege-monies (e.g. Brown, 1994; Sharp, 1993) as well as the inevitably repressive state responses to them (e.g. Stoller, 1995; Rosenthal, 1998).

A second related problem is that ecstatic trance is a direct and unmediated form of religiosity in which people experience their religion in a way that cannot be controlled by others. In fact, one informant notes that many people in the central administration do not like ecstatic trance precisely for this reason: because then they lose control over people in the church.

Clearly, trance is about more than gender: it expresses a conflict between formal mediated religious knowledge and direct, unmediated religious experience. It therefore has the potential to contest the religious hierarchy of Cheondogyo. However, there is clearly a gender dimension to all of this. Not only are people without any formal claim to religious knowledge going into trance, the majority of them are female. Perhaps more significantly, the trance exhibited by many women is loud and boisterous.

Indeed, it is the rowdy nature of female trance that seems to be the problem. While ecstatic trance (manifested in intense motions, loud noises, or aggressive movements) is the focus of a considerable amount of attention, other types of trance do not appear to be particular targets. It is here that we enter murky territory, as this again reveals the lack of consensus on what trance is and the broad array of meanings the term *gangnyeong* encapsulates. The fact is that the lesser forms of movement exhibited by men (and some women) are also glossed in the term *gangnyeong*. To complicate matters further, forms of catatonic trance also fall into this category. These forms of trance, if we may call them so, do not receive any particular attention, and they do not elicit the kinds of reaction that the ecstatic expressions do. However, I find this interesting, because it reveals the gendering of trance that is taking place.

The forms of trance that are most explicitly condemned are exclusive to women. Therefore, the general condemnation of trance, in effect, becomes a condemnation of a largely female form of religious experience. In other words, trance is not condemned *because* it is associated with women. Rather, women are condemned because of their association with trance—or to be more specific—particular types of trance.

This censure may take several forms, ranging from public comments to physical restraints on women exhibiting these kinds of symptoms. However, the most common (and devastatingly effective) response seems to be a sort of casual mockery designed to indicate the indifference and amusement of the observer. On several occasions, male informants made comments about house-wives who become “crazy” and jump around like “madmen.” Such comments were often accompanied by impromptu performances where informants caricatured the women’s movements, just as the *sudowonjang* did. Through their varying reactions, these people ridicule ecstatic trance and question its validity as an authentic religious experience.

Gender and Trance

Why is female ecstatic trance perceived as a particular problem? First, as we have seen, ecstatic trance is signalled by intense bodily movement and attracts a great deal of attention. For this reason, a number of male religious officials seem to feel that females who exhibit trance are making an undignified spectacle of themselves. Indeed, during religious training sessions a striking contrast can be drawn between the sober, composed posture of male religious leaders and the jumping, crying, trancing women.

Perhaps more important than the perceived impropriety of such trance, is the *lack of personal control* associated with it. Amongst religious officials, there is a strong sense that once a person has experienced *gangnyeong* for the first time, further physical manifestations are

unnecessary. This general position is reflected in the following comments: “Shaking is a natural procedure of spiritual training. However, it is a procedure not a goal. People have to learn to control it. Although shaking is not by my will it is easy to control” or “Once you have reached the level where you shake, once you have done it once you have proved it to yourself. After that, you don’t need to shake anymore—you can control it.”

A clear equation is made between female ecstatic trance and spiritual immaturity. Furthermore, perceived lack of control is not only evidence that such women have failed to master their training, but it also aligns them with a particular *type* of spirituality. This is because Cheondogyo leaders and adherents seem to make a distinction between two forms of spirituality: quiet (*muk*) spirituality, which is associated with prayer, scriptural knowledge, and formal learning; and loud (*hyeon*) spirituality, which is associated more with the energetic move-ment and ecstatic religiosity of spiritual training. Theoretically, both of these elements are necessary to the constitution of sound spirituality in all adherents. Nevertheless, in practice these spiritual styles seem to become gendered: men are associated more with quiet spirituality and women are associated more with loud spirituality, and different value is ascribed to each.

The distinctions between these two forms of spirituality in Cheondogyo seem to play into broader cultural understandings of male and female spirituality, which were historically separated into the two spheres of Confucianism and shamanism. Kendall (1985) provides a useful discussion of this ritual separation. She writes,

Men’s rituals are usually described as Confucian. Women’s rituals have been called spirit worship, shamanism, folk beliefs, and superstition. The form and content, indeed the very mood of men’s and women’s religious actions pose contrasts, but these contrasts are fluid, never absolute. Men sometimes perform community-level rituals that include, in combination with more sober elements, some loud, flamboyant, “shamanistic” frolicking, and women’s rituals sometimes include silent, reverential acts and a bit of asceticism. Nuances shift, but there remain rituals appropriate to men and rituals appropriate to women (27).

As Kendall points out, although the ritual styles of males and females in their respective realms differ, the contrast is never absolute. In a similar fashion, although male and female religious styles in Cheondogyo are also seen to differ, the absolute separation of quiet and loud spirituality is neither complete nor desired, yet, at some level, it is undeniably gendered.

The gendering of religious experience is most apparent in the connection many Cheondogyo adherents assert between ecstatic trance and shamanism. They say that women who exhibit the more intense forms of trance are taking the ‘wrong path’ of spirituality into a form of shamanism. Adherents are clear that while shamans (*mudang*) may indeed meet their gods during trance, their path is incorrect and inferior to the path taken by Cheondogyo adherents. Thus, any attempt to compare female ecstatic trance with shamanism must become an implicit condemnation of the former. One male informant, in his mid thirties, summarizes this perception: “Some people say *gang-nyeong* is crazy. They say it is not the right way. It is a kind of *mudang*.”

Now, obviously this connection between ecstatic trance and shamanism must be explored more for what it reveals about Cheondogyo perceptions of spirituality than any real similarities between the two traditions. This is because these two forms of trance occur in radically different contexts and have fundamentally different meanings attached to them. Charismatic shamans (*mansin, mudang*) are acknowledged experts in dealing with the gods, achieving their spiritual expertise after years of personal affliction by the spirits, long apprenticeships, and extensive participation in *gut* and other shamanic rituals. During *gut*, *mansin* summon the gods and negotiate with them on behalf of their fellow humans, as the gods make their desires and wishes known through the bodies of their *mansin* hosts. Occasionally, female participants in the *gut* will dress in the shaman’s costumes and become entranced themselves, engaging in a trance dance known as *mugam*.¹⁰ In this context, the meaning of ecstatic trance is clear and it occurs in a setting where it is actively facilitated and even celebrated.

Because of the vast differences in the meaning and expression of ecstatic trance in Cheondogyo and shamanism, the connection asserted by a number of Cheondogyo adherents and officials seems to be rooted more in broader cultural stereotypes, than personal contact with the phenomenon. Indeed, in their general views on shamanism Cheondogyo adherents differ little from their Christian counterparts; that is to say, they tend to be contemptuous, fearful and dismissive. However, that this connection is made in the first place is telling.

The effect of this larger association with shamanism is that female ecstatic trance becomes confirmation of a female affinity with a rowdy, boisterous and instinctive form of spirituality. The outcome of these notions is that instead of trance providing evidence of spiritual perfection, as it did in the case of Cheondogyo's founder, it often becomes associated with spiritual immaturity and illegitimacy. Thus, the trance of some women would appear to be used against women more generally to justify their lack of formal power in the religion.

Trance in Theoretical Perspective

Any examination of trance along these lines must immediately recall I. M. Lewis's thesis regarding the predisposition of women to spirit possession and ecstatic trance. In his elegantly written *Ecstatic Religion*, Lewis (1971) argues that 'peripheral possession' is a strategy used by marginal and oppressed groups in an oblique attempt to redress their subordinate social status. Possession trance therefore operates as a form of 'psychic workout' for the oppressed.

Although presently unfashionable, the power of Lewis's functionalist argument lies in the fact that he has produced a remarkably neat and coherent explanation for trance, which, at first glance, accords strikingly well with the ethnographic record. By all appearances, trance in Cheondogyo seems to fit Lewis's thesis and it could certainly be argued that trance serves as a mechanism in Cheondogyo which allows females the opportunity for cathartic

release. However, as Ram (2001: 200-1) notes, while there is value in this sort of functionalist approach, attending as it does to the underlying social relations of inequality that inform ecstatic religiosity, nevertheless it subsumes the specificities of spirit possession and ecstatic trance, in particular, their embodied meaning and integration with personal narratives.

A number of other scholars working on ecstatic religiosity in a variety of settings have produced similarly cogent critiques of Lewis's arguments (Wilson, 1967; Bourguignon, 1973; Kendall, 1985; Kapferer, 1983, 1991; Boddy, 1989, 1994; Stoller, 1995). Indeed, upon closer examination it appears that Lewis's theory does not fit the realities of trance in Cheondogyo especially well either.

First, Lewis' distinction between mainstream morality and peripheral possession cults seems to bear little relevance to Cheondogyo.¹¹ As we have seen, Cheondogyo was founded upon ecstatic trance and this experience can hardly be considered peripheral to the religion. Indeed, what is so interesting about Cheondogyo is the fact that a religion founded on such experiences, one whose very legitimacy rests on them, now seeks to marginalize those who express the same fervor. It is in this respect that Cheondogyo diverges from a number of other movements rooted in the experience of religious ecstasy. In Cheondogyo, the repression and control of ecstatic trance does not come from *outside* of the religion, but from *within*.

Such responses to ecstatic trance speak to the ongoing relevance of Weber's (1964) discussions regarding the difficulty (for him the inability) of incorporating charisma ("the gift of grace") within a system based on legal authority. For Weber, social movements based on charismatic authority must inevitably give way to traditional authority and eventually legal, institutionalized authority if they are to survive. Yet, when charisma is founded in a religious ecstasy, which all adherents have the capacity to induce (thanks to the magical incantation *jumun*) the transition from charismatic to legal authority seems less clear cut.

A second problem with Lewis' theory is that it assumes the intentionality of women to manipulate men. Rather than being taken

as a valid religious phenomenon in its own right, possession trance becomes an indirect strategy of attack in a sex war between men and women. This perspective minimizes the reality of possession for those people who experience it, as possession trance becomes merely one more weapon in a female arsenal aimed at alleviating their oppression.

All evidence in Cheondogyo would indicate that rather than being a conscious strategy used by women to manipulate men, trance is a fundamentally transformative experience: it radically reshapes the consciousness of those who experience it. This transformative potential of trance has struck me repeatedly when I have interviewed female informants. A brief discussion of several women's trance experiences will serve to demonstrate my point.

Mrs. Pak

Mrs. Pak is a school teacher in her early thirties. When I first interviewed her she was unmarried, but she has subsequently married and had a child, and a second is on the way. She has belonged to Cheondogyo since the age of five. Her aunt married a man who was a Cheondogyo adherent and her aunt then encouraged Mrs. Pak's mother to join. Her father did not join Cheondogyo until much later—after he retired. Mrs. Pak has a younger brother and sister who are also Cheondogyo adherents.

Although she attended Cheondogyo services at the small local parish with her mother from a young age, she was not particularly interested in the religion. It was not until her third year of college that Miss. Pak began to truly believe in Cheondogyo. At the time, her life was difficult and stressful because she had no time for anything except work. She wanted to find an escape from her oppressive studies, so she asked her mother if she could go to the spiritual training centre (*sudowon*) for a week. This experience turned out to be life changing (spiritually and personally—as she met her future husband at this time).

At the training center, she chanted jumun and in her free time she read from the scriptures. Her seniors told her stories about

Hanullim and she began to realize the existence of God and also realized how thankful she was to her parents. After this revelation she experienced ecstatic trance (*gangnyeong*), which she described as “feeling the spirit of God.” After this first experience of trance, she felt very thankful and happy and felt as if she was somehow more responsible for her life. After she returned home she felt much better about her work—the experience at the center changed her life forever.

Mrs. Han

Mrs. Han is a very attractive woman in her late thirties. She is married with two young sons. Although she has belonged to Cheondogyo her whole life, it was only recently that she became a “true believer.” Despite her prior lack of commitment to Cheondogyo she now feels very strongly about the “truth” of the religion and would like to see Cheondogyo spread throughout the world through the creation of a professional ministry.

Mrs. Han maintains that her present strong commitment to Cheondogyo is the result of a recent religious experience she had during a difficult period of her life. At this time, things were very stressful for her. Her mother-in-law had just passed away and she had to run the household by herself as well as attend Buddhist services for her mother-in-law. Her husband also suspected his young, attractive wife of having an affair and so she had to deal with his accusations of adultery on top of everything else.

During this period, she felt very unhappy and depressed. However, one day while she was sitting in a Buddhist service to honor her mother-in-law she suddenly felt very cold and started trembling¹²; she also had a sore throat. She began to feel more and more like she was undergoing some kind of revelation, when suddenly she felt at peace. She believes that at this time she experienced the “truth” of Cheondogyo and was guided in her transformation by God (*Hanullim*), Buddha and her mother-in-law. Since this time, her life has been transformed. She feels a sense of peace and equanimity and has a new purpose and attitude towards life.

Mrs. Shin

Mrs. Shin is a woman in her seventies from North Korea who was born into Cheondogyo. During the Korean War she fled to South Korea with her husband, who died several years ago. She has several children and they are all Cheondogyo believers. She feels that she has always believed strongly in the truth of Cheondogyo. However, a turning point in her life occurred when she was struck down by a severe illness in her thirties and was given only a few months to live. At this point in time she was very depressed and was in an enormous amount of pain. One day she heard a voice in her head saying, “you must pray to *Hanullim*,” So she prayed all night and afterwards she felt better. Although the disease lasted for several more years before going into remission, her health improved after that night. She noted that when she gets sick now, she just wishes her illness to be gone and it disappears.

She did not specifically use the term *gangnyeong* to describe her experiences until I asked her if this was how she understood them. At this point she agreed, noting that she can experience trance at will because she is a divine human (*shinseon*) and she and God are one. She said she has cured two people and she has a special affinity with animals. She noted that she is now experiencing a heavenly paradise on earth (*jisangcheonguk*) and that she belongs to God’s world. To demonstrate the validity of this statement she pointed out that my request to interview her was no coincidence. She had a few hours to spare before her friends were due to pick her up when I had suddenly arrived to occupy her time.

There are quite striking similarities in all of the three cases, despite the diverse ages, backgrounds and classes of the three women. In each case, prior to the onset of a mystical experience, all were experiencing common feelings of stress, depression and a lack of control over their lives. Indeed, in all cases we can clearly see that each woman experienced some kind of trauma prior to her ecstatic religious experience such as the death of a loved one, a personal breakdown, or serious health problems.

In each case, the mystical trance experience was later defined as a turning point, which transformed the women's lives in quite dramatic ways. As Janice Boddy (1989: 353) notes in her study of spirit possession amongst Sudanese women in Hofriyat, possession encourages a limited dismantling of the taken-for-granted world, which enables women to see their lives in a very different light. Therefore, the effects of trance do not stop at the religious training center; they are positive, permanent and transformative.

Clearly then, many women who have experienced trance understand their experiences in ways very different from what is defined by religious officials. Indeed, I would suggest that many of the people who witnessed the trancing women, described at the beginning of this paper, did not share the opinion of the religious officials that they had witnessed a 'foolish fever.' Prior to the official denunciation, the audience publicly authenticated the ecstatic religious experience they had witnessed. Further-more, the overt condemnations of trance do not necessarily invalidate the sense of personal transformation and empowerment that it can bring to the women who experience it. As Ram (2001) notes in her discussion of spirit possession in South India, "although women rely on the possession narratives of others, they seldom simply reproduce a standardised cultural narrative of their possession experiences. Instead, they integrate possession into the particularities of their biographies" (187).

Now, the question is: if trance transforms the consciousness of those women who experience it, what effects, if any, does this have on broader cultural notions of gender in Cheondogyo? Drawing on Gluckman's work on 'rituals of rebellion' Erika Bourguignon (1973) argues that although expressing dissatisfaction with the social structure as it exists, in some contexts possession trance actually helps to preserve this structure by offering a safety valve for accumulated pressures. Because women alleviate their frustrations in a ritual context, they do not move to address the larger problems of inequality in their everyday lives. Moreover, the actions of women in

trance, and their very penchant for it, reinforce existing views about their weakness and inferiority.

Lewis (1971) is critical of what he calls an 'establishment' view of possession trance and its accompanying rituals and he is clear that possession rituals do not use up the store of revolutionary fervor. In his words, "However seemingly satisfying the play of such cults, the potentiality for deeper and more radical outbursts of pent-up resentment is always there" (116-7). Nevertheless, implicit in his work seems to be an argument very much along Bourguignon's (1973) lines. She argues that it is important to distinguish between micro-change and macro-change when we are discussing the effects of trance. According to her, micro-change refers to modifications in the social situation of an individual without implying a modification of the social structure. Macro-change, on the other hand, refers to massive modifications in the life of a society. Thus, macro-change facilitates broader social change, whereas micro-change actively inhibits it.

A cursory application of this theory to Cheondogyo is interesting. From Bourguignon's perspective, it could be argued that ecstatic trance produces micro-change rather than macro-change. It has empowering effects on individual women's lives, but at a broader social level, it plays a role in reinforcing the status quo, as the ecstatic forms of trance exclusive to women become evidence of an essential female spirituality, which is inferior to that of men. However, such functionalist characterizations are problematic because of the *meanings* attached to trance (Ram, 2001: 201).

This once again brings us back to the point that although trance seems to become gendered in practice, it draws upon broader philosophical tensions within Cheondogyo theology. As stated previously, trance is threatening not because of its association with women but because of its association with divinity. In fact, perhaps even more than the divine implications of trance, it is the multiple meanings attached to it that are the problem. In other formal religious contexts,¹³ trance has been very successfully incorporated into mainstream religious practice without threatening the religious

hierarchy as a whole. For example, Pentecostal Christianity recognizes the validity of ecstatic religious experiences, which are understood to be a form of possession by the Holy Spirit. However, an important distinction is made between “receiving the Spirit” and “receiving the Fullness of the Spirit” (Wood, 1980: 11-7), which seems to promote the established religious order. Thus, while lay adherents commonly experience the former, the latter is relatively rare—and must be authenticated by established religious leaders. In this context, the meanings attached to ecstatic religious experiences are clearly established, and generally agreed upon by all.

Where Cheondogyo differs from other religions is in the lack of widespread agreement on the implications of ecstatic trance, which can indicate divine possession, inherent divinity, fleeting contact with cosmic energy, or a shaman-style walk down the religious garden path. These contrasting meanings stem from the changing perspectives on trance across time, which in turn are related to the changing perceptions of God. As I have noted, when Cheondogyo’s founder fell into a trance he was possessed by a God with many transcendent qualities. Yet, over time, as the doctrine of *In Nae Cheon* was introduced, the idea of possession by a separate God has become increasingly problematic. The result is that the meanings of trance are in flux, and it is precisely this fluidity that makes trance threatening. To explain, while in other contexts religious ecstasy commonly generates new possibilities, it is generally incorporated into an established framework, which has clear views regarding the divine and the human and their interconnectedness. In Cheondogyo these interconnections are far less clear-cut.

The leaders of Cheondogyo are not only unable to fix the meanings of trance, at some level they are probably also unwilling to create an orthodox stance on it. To assert that trance represents an inferior form of religiosity would be to deny the divine basis of their religion. To claim trance as a temporary possession by a separate God would contradict their religious dogma that God lies within. To declare that trance is about manifesting one’s God-self, raises the menace of managing a congregation of ten thousand self-proclaimed

Gods.¹⁴ Thus, it is ironic that for the very perpetuation of Cheondogyo, trance must remain fluid, without a fixed orthodox meaning. And, it is this very fluidity which makes it problematic to define female trance as a safety valve which reproduces the status quo. While it may occasionally seem to function in this fashion, trance draws upon much broader religious meanings that make it impossible to limit its effects to gender.

Conclusions

In this paper I have explored some of the complexities surrounding ecstatic trance as they are manifested in a specific religious context. I have shown that despite the overarching ideological egalitarianism of Cheondogyo, there are certain gender differences in the religion regarding access to power and authority. These differences are most clearly articulated in the realm of ecstatic religious experience, which is dominated by women. While the pattern of religious ecstasy in Cheondogyo would seem to fit the pan-cultural theories of female deprivation generated by theorists such as I. M. Lewis, the complexity of these experiences in Cheondogyo (and elsewhere) defies simple, reductive explanation.

While ecstatic trance in Cheondogyo appears to confirm certain cultural conceptions regarding the essential nature of femininity, for the women who undergo these experiences, trance is incorporated into personal histories in transformative and empowering ways. Furthermore, the potential threat religious ecstasy poses to Cheondogyo's central administration stems not from its association with femininity but from its association with divinity and its capacity to manifest tensions inherent to the religion's structure and theology.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the Korea Foundation, whose generous fellowship enabled the completion of the fieldwork from which this paper draws heavily. I am also grateful to the Asian Center for Women's Studies at Ewha Womans University for their support during my tenure as a Visiting Research Fellow over the summer of 2002. Finally, I would like to thank Darlene McNaughton and Dr. Douglas Miles of James Cook University who read and provided useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Notes

1. Most notably, Laurel Kendall's (1985) work on shamanism, and Youngsook Kim Harvey's research into shamanism (1979) and Christianity (1987). Obviously, there are numerous other scholars who have produced important ethnographic studies on Korean religion without a gender focus, as well as gender studies on Korean religion without an ethnographic focus.

2. Those so inclined can actually spend 49 days or 105 days in training

3. The sect underwent a name change in 1905 to Cheondogyo—'Religion of the Heavenly Way'.

4. By divinity, I mean in the way of gods, goddesses. I recognize that in Christianity people can have a special relationship with the divine and take on certain special qualities themselves—i.e. saints. However, I see this to be different from Cheondogyo doctrine, which stresses that humans, in a sense, are God.

5. Although I do not have the space to discuss the changing conceptions of God in Cheondogyo, the interested reader is directed to Bell (2000: Chapter 3).

6. Bourguignon herself notes that there is a certain degree of overlap between these categories.

7. However, it is important to note that this possession by God is temporary, and trance is a key sign of it. Spirit possession in many cultural contexts, even a shamanic context in Korea, is not always accompanied by an altered state of consciousness and often trance has to be actively induced by the possessed person.

8. Although Cheondogyo officials would strongly resist such characterizations, for reasons that shall soon become apparent.

9. It is often quite difficult to ascertain whether someone is in trance or merely shaking because some people seem to use the latter as a way of inducing trance rather than as an expression of it.

10. My brief overview can hardly do justice to the color and complexity of this phenomenon—see Kendall (1977; 1985; 1988) for an excellent description of all of these dimensions of Korean shamanism.

11. Lewis' (1971) distinction also seems to run into problems in other cultural contexts. See Henney (1973) on Shakers in the West Indies, Boddy (1989: 140) on the Zar cults in Sudan, Kendall (1985: 24-25) on shamans in Korea.

12. Her description of her first ecstatic religious experience obviously bears close similarity to the experiences recounted by the founder Choe Je-u when he first received his revelation from God. However, it is fascinating that it occurred while she was sitting in a Buddhist ceremony!

13. For example, where a religion has a formal doctrine and organizational framework—unlike shamanism.

14. Actually, Cheondogyo leaders do occasionally have to deal with the problem of adherents proclaiming themselves to be 'God.' I witnessed one incident during my fieldwork in 1998 when a man walked into a religious lecture, punched the speaker in the face, and declared himself to be God. The audience and the religious lecturer were neither convinced nor amused.

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