The Korean

Namsadang

by Young Ja Kim

Throughout history, popular forms of theatre have appeared, merged and disappeared, almost unnoticed by scholars and historians. With many, it is difficult to discover the period of their origin or to trace the process of development. This is the case with the Korean variety of entertainment known as the Namsadang.

As a type of indigenous performing theatre in Korea up to 1920, the Namsadang troupes traveled around the country with a program of six variety entertainments: P'ungmul, the farmers' band music and dancing; Bona, spinning a bowl on a pole; Salp'an, acrobatic acts; Orum, rope walking; Totbegi, or masked dance; and Tolmi, (Kkotjukaksi Norum), puppet plays. The Namsadang was both the most important form of professional theatre and the transmitter of popular entertainment that had existed and developed in Korea throughout the generations. Reflecting the common peoples' harsh living conditions and their resentment toward the ruling class in the late Yi Dynasty, the Namsadang evolved as the theatre of the commoners. The degree of hatred for the ruling class and the subtlety of the parody in their performances exceeded that of other folk theatres. The Namsadang was the voice of the common people, and the performers were common people themselves.

The Namsadang troupe appears to have been a homosexual community. It was composed of 40 to 50 single homeless males, including about 14 senior performers and
a number of novices. According to Sim Woo-song in *Namsadangp’ae*, they were divided into groups of *Suddongmo* ("butch") and *Yodongmo* ("queen"); all newcomers belonged to *Yodongmo*.

The *Namsadang* was controlled by the *Kkotusoe*, the head of the group, who was elected from among the 14 *Ddunsoe*, the supervisors and expert performers in each unit of the performance group. Under the *Ddunsoe* there were several *Kayol*, who were junior performers, and the newcomers, called *Ppiri*, who took care of the chores. After being evaluated by the *Ddunsoe*, the newcomer was allocated to a particular unit; then he was trained in specific skills. Until he became a *Kayol*, he was supposed to put on women’s dress during the performance and to play the female part in their community, whereas the senior members played the male roles.

The number of *Ppiri* was often less than half of all the members. The competition among the *Namsadang* groups for a handsome *Ppiri* was noticeable. Indeed, a high number of *Ppiri* made a *Namsadang* group more popular among the people. According to Kim Keun-baa, a former *Namsadang* performer, some senior performers made extra income by letting their male lovers sleep with the servants in the villages where the troupe was performing.

The newcomers of the *Namsadang* were, in most cases, recruited from children who left their homes. Sometimes the children joined voluntarily while the *Namsadang* group was visiting their village. It is said that there were cases where the *Namsadang* members had seduced the children from their homes. “The late performer Yang Do-il joined the group when he was six, while the *Namsadang* was visiting his village. As a servant at the age of six, he was already leading a hard life. He followed the *Namsadang* because he did not want to go to work” (Lee Yong-ki, *Chugan Hangkuk* [weekly Korea], 25 February 1979).

Homosexuality was extremely immoral in the eyes of Confucianism. In a society that had been under strong Confucian influence for so many hundreds of years, it is probable, however, that the *Namsadang* performers were treated simply as outcasts and were ignored by the educated class. Their homosexuality does not seem to have concerned their audience, the common people.

The performance of the *Namsadang* was given for the villagers without charge. Though the group’s financial situation was barely adequate for survival, providing food and lodging for the group was the only condition for a performance. However, when the village people offered them some money as they were leaving the next morning, the *Namsadang* accepted it with thanks.

When the *Namsadang* arrived at the hillside of a village, they would play boisterous farmer’s music while waiting for the movement of the village flag as a sign of acceptance. If the village flags were not seen in the field, they performed a few acrobatic tricks on the hillside, while the *Kombaengi*, an administrative assistant, walked into the village, requesting permission from the people who had power.

“Without permission from the village representatives such as the landowners or the officials from the upper class, the *Namsadang* were not able to enter the village” (Sim Woo-song, *Namsadangp’ae*). If the *Namsadang* were accepted, the performers marched in to the tune of the farmer’s music.
The Performance

The performance would start after supper. A fire is set on the wide field where the performance is to be presented. A puppet stage box about two-and-a-half meters square is usually set up with four thick poles erected at the corners and a curtain stretched around the poles. The screen curtain is set high so the spectators cannot see the puppeteers, who will manipulate the puppets from behind the curtain. Next, a tightrope eight meters long is suspended between poles for the Orum (rope-walking). Mattresses are spread on the ground. A small one is placed in front of the puppet stage for the musicians and Sanjabi (the one who converses with the puppets during the performance), and a large one is laid out as a stage for the Bona (spinning a bowl on a pole), and the Salp'an (the acrobats).

While this stage equipment is being installed, the musicians and dancers stroll about, playing instruments in each corner of the village. Then the spectators are drawn out of their houses and joyfully follow the musicians, making a long street procession. Finally they arrive at the prepared field.

P'ungmul

The P'ungmul is basically the farmers' band music interwoven with dancing and acrobatics. The instrumental ensemble for the P'ungmul uses percussion and one melodic instrument: Kkwaenggwari, a small handheld gong; Chango, an hourglass shaped stick drum; Sogo, a small handheld drum; and Taepyongso, a double-reed conical oboe-like instrument with a flared bell. The late Kim Keun-bae, who had been the

Procession, top, and acrobatic dance of the P'ungmul
leader of a Namsadang group, told Sim that the P’ungmul is a consolidated form borrowed from farmers’ music from each of the Kyounggi, Cholla, and Kyongsang provinces.

The costumes of the performers in a P’ungmul performance are colorful. The Sangsoe, a first Kwaeenggari (small gong player), who is also a leader of the group, wears a pink, blue and yellow band around his waist and a Soetalbunggiji on his head. The Soetalbunggiji is a hat made of cow skin with furs that swivel as the dancer moves. The rest of the musicians wear the same dress except that their waistband is of two colors, pink and yellow. The Mudong, the dancers, wear the traditional Korean female dress.

The first part of the P’ungmul is performed by the musicians and dancers and by the spectators who follow them to the prepared stage. The procession is led by a ridiculous clown Yangban, who wears a Yangban’s white overcoat and Kai (hat), and carries a long pipe and fan in his hand. (Yangban was the upper class that included military and civil officials.) Wearing a distorted mask, he behaves in a silly fashion and keeps intruding upon the performance of his comrades during the whole P’ungmul. Twenty-six different dance patterns accompanied by music are performed during one show, each by a team of 24 to 30 musicians and dancers. While playing and dancing, the performers engage in humorous dialog and jokes.

The first dance pattern, Insakut, involves offering greetings to the spectators. Consecutive patterns are executed by the dancers and musicians who play instruments at the same time: Tollim-bopku, in which the small-drum players make acrobatic twists and turns, almost falling down; Obanggijin, a formation in which the dancers divide into five groups at the five cardinal points—north, south, east, west and center—and rotate in smaller circles; Mudong-nori, the dance of the child actors; Kasaejin, a crab-like sideways movement; Sangsoe-nori, done by the first small-gong player, who plays his Kwaeenggari and turns the tassel on his hat; etc.

**Bona**

The P’ungmul is followed by the Bona performance, which consists of spinning a bona, a round vessel made of straws and bamboo, on a pole 40 centimeters long. The instrumental ensemble provides music for two or three minutes, and the Bonachebi (Bona player) and Mehossi (clown) sing a variety of popular music known as Maewha Tarong, or Song of the Plum Blossom. After the Bonachebi spins the Bona, various skills are demonstrated, using other objects such as a knife, long pipe, etc. A wash basin is spun in the same way as the Bona. Whenever a new skill is about to be presented, witty remarks are exchanged between the Bonachebi and the Mehossi, with an appropriate tune provided by the musicians. The two joke about the commoners’ impoverished conditions and make puns and satirical explanations of how to use the object which is about to be spun: “Anyway, there is nothing to eat, so let’s spin the dishes,” one performer might say to the other. The performance emphasizes improvised comic dialog rather than simply presenting the skillful spinning acts.

**Salp’an**

After the Bona performance, in the Salp’an section of the performance, consecutive acrobatic acts are performed to the accompaniment of music. Added to these are improvised dialog between the Salp’ansoe (acrobat) and the Mehossi (clown), in the same manner as the Bona performance.

The basic movement of the acrobat is a kind of tumbling called Salp’an, which has numerous variations: alternating slow and fast tumbling, tumbling sideways, changing
the direction of the tumbling from left to right and vice versa, twisting the body around with both hands and feet planted on the floor, twisting the body 10 times or more without a pause in the air while tumbling, etc.

**Orum**

Before the *Orum* starts, a ritual is performed by the *Orumsani* (tightrope walker) under the rope. Then he balances himself with a large paper fan and the loose sleeves of his coat, exchanging jokes and stories with the *Mehossi* and performing a variety of acts, including riding on the rope with one foot, the other foot being raised up and down while stretching or bending the body; jumping back on his feet from a sitting position on the rope with both legs stretched out; sitting and standing up with one foot on the rope; standing on the rope with one foot after sitting sideways on the rope; walking with his knees on the rope, etc. As in the *Bona* and *Salp’an* performances, the exchange of witty dialog between the skilled performer and the *Mehossi* is as important as the skillful acts.

**Totbegi**

After the *Orum* performance, the musicians remain on the stage for the *Totbegi* performance. The inside of the curtained puppet stage is used as a dressing room for masked dance players. After an intermission of two or three minutes, the masked dance drama begins.

The emphasis of this performance is on dance. Other elements include pantomime, farcical or witty stories, songs and conversations among the characters. The drama is divided into scenes that are mostly independent of one another. According to Sim Woo-song in *Namsadangpa’ae*, there are four scenes in the *Totbegi*: *Madang Ssitki* (cleaning the place), *Omtal Jabki* (catching the depraved monk with boils), *Sannim*
Tightrope walker and musicians in Orum

Jabki (catching the man of letters), and the Mokjung Jabki (catching the monks; foreign religion). The connection of independent scenes is achieved by dance and appropriate music by the instrumental ensemble.

Among the characters are Sannim (Yangban), an old woman, Ch‘wibari (the prodigal), Multugi (servant), Muksoe (servant), Mockjung (Buddhist monk), Omjung (Buddhist monk), Pizori (young woman), Kkoksoe (servant), and Jangsoe (servants).

Most of the masks are made of either paper or gourd, but such materials as wood, cloth, wool, leather, earth and bamboo are also used. The mask covers the entire face. On the back is attached a cloth, which covers the back of the head and is also used for securing the mask.

In Madang Ssitki, the first scene of the Totbegi, witty conversations and dance by the servants are followed by the servant Multugi’s monolog. This monolog, a part of Shamanistic ritual ceremony invoking good luck from the deities, is performed in order to purify the area where the masked dance drama will take place. The scenes that follow satirize the depraved monks and express hatred for the Yangban class. In the Omtal Jabki scene, the ideological falsehood of the apostate monk is revealed through the dance and the farcical story of a monk and a servant. In the Sannim Jabki scene, the servants insult the privileged aristocracy.

Dolmi (Kkoktukaksi Norum)

The Kkoktukaksi Norum (Dolmi) was often performed on the threshing ground or in a town marketplace by the puppeteers who traveled from place to place, visiting farm-
Characters in Totbegi, the masked dance drama

Kkotukaksi puppets and musicians
ing or fishing villages. Around the end of the Yi Dynasty this Kkottukaksi play became popular, and the emerging Namsadang included puppet shows among their variety entertainment. The Kkottukaksi play is the last unit of the Namsadang performance and the main event among the six entertainment forms.

The puppet performance is preceded by song and accompanied by music played by three or four musicians who are seated facing the puppet stage. The puppeteers behind the curtain manipulate the puppets above the screen curtain so that the spectators can see only the puppets. The main puppeteer, Daebi (Rod Holder), who is seated in the center, is in charge of staging the puppets—controlling their movements, gestures, singing, dancing and dialog.

An equally important role is performed by the Sanjib (Interlocutor), who is seated in front of the puppet stage. As a villager, he leads the dialog with Pak Chomji, who assumes the role of the narrator within the play, appearing at every curtain and thus maintaining a continuity throughout the performance.

The plays are divided into between seven and 10 acts or scenes without any consistent connections. The characters of the Kkottukaksi total 13 and accessories include a hawk, a pheasant, a funeral palanquin, banners, a temple and a statue of Buddha. The main materials of which the puppets are made are half gourds, wood, thick paperboard and clay. The size of each puppet and its properties vary according to the size of the puppet play team and the puppet maker.

Since the dialog of the play, like that of most folk dramas, was passed on orally, it is natural that some differences exist in the texts of different groups. However, the content is the same. The characteristic features are satire on the apostate monk, conflicts over polygamy, the disclosure of the common class' contempt for and derision of superficial morals, earnest desire for heavenly bliss after death and the worship of Buddha.

In 1960 a committee of the Namsadang Folk Theatre was organized by Sim Woon-sung, and a reunion of qualified Namsadang performers was attempted. In 1964, as a result of the Korean government's efforts to preserve and strengthen Korean folk arts, the Kkottukaksi Norum, the last part of the Namsadang, was designated as "Important Intangible Cultural Treasure Number Three."

Meanwhile, a pioneering study of the Namsadang was undertaken by Sim Woon-sung. He interviewed surviving Namsadang performers and asked them about the theatre and their lives with the troupe. He documented their work from a re-created performance.

Though there have been many efforts by individuals or by institutions to preserve the Namsadang, it has been difficult to transmit its performing skills. Those who had been members of the Namsadang have already died or are too old to perform; only a few people are interested in learning their arts. However, even if we were able to carry on completely the Namsadang performing arts, the true Namsadang—who were the friends of the oppressed common people—are gone forever.