

The Beat of Korea

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Dance is a beautifully complex thing. Its most basic definition is the sequencing of purposefully chosen human movements, though it is so much more. It can be emotive and provocative. It can be subdued or explosive. It can be nonsensical or convey a story or feeling to connect with the audience. Dance can be whatever the choreographer or dancer needs it to be. Within dance, there are too many forms to name from ballet, ballroom, and jazz to tap, contemporary, and folk dancing. Dance is celebrated globally with nearly every culture having its own unique dances. This essay will be focussing on traditional Korean Folk dances, specifically drum dances. It will touch on the history and origin of drum dances, where and when they are performed, what they mean, and the principles of the dance as well as any modern changes, if any have occurred.

Most traditional Korean Folk dances' roots can be vaguely traced back to shamanistic rituals. Before Buddhism, Christianity, and partly Confucianism began “influencing Korean religious mentality,” shamanism was the religion of the region that is North and South Korea today (CHRIS, 1996). “There are many spirits and deities [in shamanism]. . .” and shaman law was that you were to create harmony between the heavens and Earth (CHRIS, 1996). From this belief, rituals were created and performed to hopefully attain a revelation or harmony. As time passed, these ritualistic dances evolved. While some stayed in rural areas as folk dances, others, around the era of the Joseon Dynasty, became dances performed in the royal court. But in the 1900s these traditions Folk dances suffered a massive loss due to Westernization, the Japanese occupation and World War II, and the Korean War. They were either reassigned to mythology or were lost and forgotten due to Japan's cultural suppression of Korea and what could be called an attempt of cultural genocide. Thankfully, however, many of these dances were kept alive in secret. Today there is a resurgence of interest in traditional Korean culture and dance, like the famous Samulnori troupe who has dedicated their careers to spreading Korean music and dance (CHRIS, 1996).

Originally, traditional Korean folk dances were performed in large open areas, like a field, with spectators all around (CHRIS, 1996). There used to be professional traveling troupes that would go from village to village improvising and performing in large open areas and essentially created an impromptu festival for the people to gather, be entertained, and sell their wares (CHRIS, 1996). Festivals were the most common time and place for Folk dances to be performed because the traditional festivals were shamanistic religious events (Kim, J.Y., 2010). They were the joining of work and play as well as harmonizing religious rituals and having fun (Kim, J.Y., 2010). In most places today, festivals have lost their religious significance in preference to just having fun, while Korea remains unique for keeping the balance between the two intact (Kim, J.Y., 2010). And while Folk dances are still performed out in the open, many were adapted to the stage to fit for the new generation (CHRIS, 1996).

As previously mentioned, traditional Korean Folk dances are of shamanistic origin and were dominantly performed at festivals. Their meanings and purpose, however, varied greatly. There were, of course, overarching themes but many of the Folk dances “reflected the characteristics of the . . . local communities. . .” (Kim, J.Y., 2010). Some Folk dances were to please a god or spirit and others were to identify the intentions of them (Kim, J.Y., 2010). Many were held to “. . .to wish for a good harvest, peace of the community, and to please and impress the god. . .” all the while entertaining the people (Kim, J.Y., 2010). Beyond spiritual meanings, these dances served to also bring the community together, as an activity for many to participate in and create a sense of friendship and social cohesion (File, C., 2013). They were a way for normal people to get rid of anguish, relieve tension, and express themselves artistically (File, C., 2013). Along with respect for nature and self-expression, traditional Korean Folk dances were also highly emotional. The two dominant emotions said to be expressed are “. . . *han* and *sinmyeong*, two concepts that have been integral to the Korean people’s lives (File, C., 2013).” Both of these words have complex meanings. *Han* can be described as a feeling of profound grief or sadness that comes out of the hearts of the common folk due to invasions from

neighboring countries and Korea's social structure (File, C., 2013). *Sinmyeong* is the mirror emotion to *han*, it is the feelings of exhilaration, ecstasy, and is essentially the light at the end of the tunnel (File, C., 2013).

Drumming, and drum dances are a large sector of Korean Folk dance. Within drumming and drum dancing itself, there are several different kinds. Janggo, the hourglass drum, Buk, the barrel drum, Kkwaengwari, the hand gong, and Jing, the large gong, are four of many different kinds of Korean drums (Ensemble Jeng Yi). Traditionally, most of these instruments were made out of wood, leather, some with rope, and nearly all with a high level of craftsmanship and detail. Samulnori, Samgomu, Sorichume, and Busking Nori are four of the many kinds of Korean drum dances (Learn More). Samulnori is a more recreational percussion performance given by farmers (Learn More). Within Samulnori, there are four instruments played with each representing a different aspect of nature having to do with the “. . .harvest reason: Swae is lighting, Janggoo is rain, Buk is the clouds, and Jing is the wind (Learn More).” Samgomu dance is where a person stands in between three traditional, circular, Korean drums, hanging on square frames that form a triangle around her and is one of the oldest Buddhist drum dances (Learn More). Personally, Samgomu is my favorite because of its dynamic and grandiose movements. Sorichume is where there is “. . . a large variety of Korean instruments. . .” and dance being performed alongside them to form one large performance and Busking Nori is a “. . . theatrical performance. . .” where two Koreans travel the world and experience different cultures (Learn More).

When it comes to the body and principles of the movements themselves, Korean Folk dances focus on stillness, control and breathing, verticality, and the use of props (File, C., 2013). The dynamics between stillness then a burst of flurried movements are used to manipulate the emotions of the audience. It's a continuous build-up of tension then release, as the dancers flow through the motions hitting distinct, exaggerated positions “. . . rather than arriving at them. . .” (File, C., 2013). Stillness is also beneficial to the dancers as it lets them

breathe to collect and control their next movements. Breath and control are vital to Korean Folk dance. A person has to have immense control over their body to be a good dancer. Every body part from your head, shoulders, wrists, and fingers down to your legs, knees, and angles of your feet have specific positions and gestures necessary to perform the dances (File, C., 2013).

Many of these positions the body has to be in are suited towards the vertical motions that persist through many Korean dances. The up-and-down movements range from being overt in the form of jumps, representing being possessed by a spirit, to micro-movements in the shoulders, which are in time with the beating of the drums representing “. . . a sense of resignation, pain, and anguish, followed by a feeling of release” (File, C., 2013). Props also play a large role in the dances. They range from swords, mainly used by men, and fans, mainly used by women, to drums, used by both. Drums serve dual purposes as they are used in the dance as well as contributing to the music itself. For example, the Sogo is a small, light drum with two sides that is used in the Sogochum dance (*VIRTUAL KOREA*, 2020).

Korea has done an amazing job restoring its heritage and spreading its culture to the rest of the world while at the same time keeping most of it intact. That being said, change and modernization isn't a bad thing and doesn't have to negate tradition. A famous modern take on Korean Folk drum dances is Nanta. Nanta was inspired by *Stomp* and is a stage production combining traditional Korean percussion music with Broadway entertainment (*Nanta*, 2004). And while traditional Korean Folk dances are always performed in a Hanbok, the traditional clothing of Korea, Nanta is performed in a kitchen set and they're wearing chef costumes (*HANBOK*, 2020).

This essay touched on the history and origin of drum dances, where and when they are performed, what they mean, and the principles of the dance as well as a modern take. Korean drum dances are diverse and fascinating. The level of commitment and practice it takes one to do them justice is commendable and impressive.

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