

The Seosan Park Cheomji Nori as Example of the Republic of Korea's *Intangible Cultural Heritage* Safeguarding at Regional Level

- The author presents results of a research conducted during a five-month study visit to the National Folk Museum of Korea in 2017 as a part of the International Partnership Program for Cultural Partnership Initiative (CPI) of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Korea. The objective of this visit was to study the Korean system of safeguarding their *intangible heritage* as well as its effects at the institutional and communal level. The paper deals with the latter and focuses on practices of safeguarding the local specific puppet play Park Cheomji Nori, which has been included into the regional Register of the intangible cultural heritage.

Key words: *intangible cultural heritage*, traditional theater,
Park Cheomji Nori, Republika Koreja

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after returning from my study visit to the Republic of Korea, I published a paper entitled “An Outline of the Republic of Korea’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding Framework”. It was conceived as the first in a series of papers on the topic, with presentation of a historical context of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding System’s* development in focus, with special reference to its key elements: the Inheritance System (knowledge and skills transfer system) and the Inventory System (administrative system organized at national and regional levels). In short, the System was established in the 1950s and has been developing in accordance with a paradigm

of unbreakable connection between a *traditional culture* and a national identity. Due to the established legal framework and a network of very well interconnected administrative bodies, institutions and various organizations, the system has proven to be very effective, but by its implementation certain challenges arose (Dronjić 2017: 21-22, Kim et al. 2012: 95, Yim 2004: 11).

The objective of the published paper is to provide an insight into the System functioning at the regional level, on the example of the local specific puppet play Park Cheomji Nori performed by a small community in rural Chungcheongnam. In the paper I present results of a field research conducted in September 2017; I participated in the research as a member of the research team¹ of the National Folk Museum of Korea. My task was to investigate holders' view on the processes safeguarding this phenomenon of the *intangible cultural heritage*, with a special emphasis on the so called *wonhyeong*,² i.e. on the concept of the particular phenomenon's original form.

BASIC FEATURES OF THE SEOSAN PARK CHEOMJI NORI

In picturesque rural surroundings of Seosan, a city of about 175,000 inhabitants in the Chungcheongnam Province, the village of Tapgok is settled (Fig. 1). At the first glance, it does not differ from other villages in the area; about 150 inhabitants live in 54 households and the primary source of existence for capable community members is agriculture, more precisely, rice cultivation. However, Tapgok is a very important site on the map of the regional *intangible cultural heritage* because its inhabitants are actively involved in safeguarding the very specific traditional puppet play Park Cheomji Nori.

In the pre-industrial context, the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori was usually performed at the Chuseok festivity, a harvest ceremony held on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month of the year, marking the end of most agricultural activities in Korea (Cheon et al. [ed.] 2010: 212, 222). Not to endanger the play performance, it has been a common practice that wealthier families sponsor Park Cheomji Nori performers in money and in kind.

Park Cheomji Nori, the play typical for the rural area of Seosan, was created under the influence of a puppet play called *kkokdugaksi noreum*, as a part of so-called *namsandang nori*, a complex performance staged in villages by troupes of professional traveling

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2 The term *wonhyeong* can be translated as an archetype, which in the context of the safeguarding of *intangible cultural heritage* can be constructed as a specific manifestation of a particular phenomenon. Formally speaking, to determine *wonhyeong* of the particular phenomenon is a necessary step for including it into the national register or regional registers of intangible cultural heritage in the Republic of Korea. In other words, the system insists on the historical, unchanged authenticity reflecting the classic Confucian approach of deep respect for old values (comp. Howard 2002: 56). For more information about the safeguarding system of *intangible cultural heritage* in the Republic of Korea see Yim 2003; 2004 and Dronjić 2017.

2entertainers named *namsadang* (Fig. 2). *Namsadang nori* encompasses several *nori*,³ parts of performances that form a complete show, an integral part of which is a puppet play named *kkokdugaksi noreum* or *delomi*. The significance of *namsadang nori* in the context of the contemporary experience of Korean *traditional culture* is exceptional, as evidenced by the fact that its active safeguarding is encouraged at the national as well as at international levels.⁴ However, during the 20th century the play Park Cheomji Nori was transformed into an independent local tradition and today it is considered the only Korean puppet play performed by locals (i.e. amateurs), not professional performers (Cheon et al. [ed.] 2010: 222-223; Heo 2003; 2011).

On a stage, there are two groups of performers, separated by a curtain hanging on a rope stretched between two pillars or trees. Puppeteers (*dejabi*) stay behind the curtain, hidden from the audience while in front of the curtain there is a group of musicians playing aerophone, idiophone and membranophone traditional instruments. During the performance, one of the musicians actively communicates with the puppets; this element can be interpreted as the one bringing dynamics into the performance (comp. Heo 2011: 6).

The play is titled after the main protagonist, the old man Park Cheomji (Fig. 3), whose adventures and troubles are presented in twenty scenes.⁵ As far as genre is concerned, the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori is a satirical play that questions relationships between men and women, lower and higher social classes, religious and secular spheres (Cheon et al. [ed.] 2010: 222-223), unequivocally fitting into the concept of *kkokdugaksi noreum* the play originates from. Although names and features of main characters have similarities to a certain extent, as well as consistency of the scenes composition, a kind of detachment from professional troupes' versions can be noticed, creating a content outlining the value system of the local rural community. For example, criticizing the privileged class, evident in a conflict between characters of different social classes, is very rigid and coherent at many levels. Criticizing Buddhism is also typical for *namsadang nori*; it is sometimes very harsh, as hypocrisy of the clergy is openly ridiculed. However, the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori portrays Buddhism in a positive light, especially through the lens of granting someone's wish, apparent in the scene with the blind man whose sight was restored. It can be assumed it is the result of centuries' influence of the nearby Buddhist centers of Buseoksa and Gaesimsa (Heo 2003: 360-361).

Locals make puppets themselves, using natural materials, such as pine bark or various tree shoots the area is abundant with. One of the most popular material, still used for

3 The term *nori* has the meaning of a play, show or performance. *Namsadang nori* consists of *pungmul nori* (musical dance number), *beona nori* (acrobatic number with performers spinning plates on sticks or poles, supported by musical accompaniment), *salpan* (number with acrobatic elements dominated by a humorous dialogue between a clown character and one of performers), *eoreum* (walking on a rope), *teotboegi* (traditional dance under masks) and *kkokdugaksi noreum* or *delomi* (puppet play).

4 *Namsadang nori* was included in the national Register of intangible cultural heritage in 1964 (under the ordinal number 3), and since 2009 it has been a part of the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Heo 2011: 6; UNESCO 2009).

5 A record of the play can be seen on the website of the National Folk Museum of Korea (Encyclopedia of Korean Culture): <http://folkency.nfm.go.kr/kr/dic/2/video/1465> (visited on 19th April 2020).

purposes of transferring knowledge and skills, is a gourd, cultivated in a specific way. Gourds are cultivated on a grid structure, freely hanging from it. At the harvest time the best fruits are picked up to be turned into puppets. This way of growing prevents gourds from deforming and allows their development into a recognizable elongated shape with a thickening at the end, representing the future puppet head. Simplified facial features are drawn on it, while beards and a mustaches are often applied (in some cases, they are also drawn). Puppets are dressed in clothes made of plain fabric, and some have props added, such as a paper headgear or a flag. However, some characters are more intricately crafted, such as a judge from Pyongyang, riding a horse. It is possible, (very cautiously assumed) that a reason for this is the visual emphasis of his social status, but there is not enough comparative material to confirm this claim. Namely, in the past, after the Chuseok festivity most puppets were burnt in line with the widespread belief that a mask in a family home may invoke malicious spirits.⁶ Some researchers noted that “modern puppets were made in much more details and better visually designed than those used in the past” (Heo 2003: 362).

Concerning typology, hand puppets or puppets on a stick are used and the main characters do not have legs, so the audience sees them only from the waist up. Concerning all characters of the play, the difference in the size of the puppets is very visible. The main characters are bigger than the supporting ones and there is an obvious proportions imbalance between characters and architectural elements of the scenography. Even some physical attributes of characters are oversized in relation to their bodies, which is most apparent in a case of Hong Dongji character’s genitals. It is interesting to note that performers do not consider the architectural elements are scenography but characters, because they are “managed” by performers. It is important to emphasize that these characteristics should not be considered as local specifics, but as a link to *kkokdugaksi noreum* performed by professional performers as a part of *namsandang nori*, in which similar elements occur. The reason for conscious ignoring proportional relations could be considered a symbolic marker containing coded meanings: “Instead of reproducing an object in proportion to its actual size, the oversized and large, even to the extent of exaggeration, is considered meaningful.” (Heo 2003: 361)

From a technical point of view, a puppet control is extremely simple. In most cases, a performer controls a puppet with a hand (in case of a hand puppet type) or with a stick, i.e. an elongated body of a pumpkin hidden under clothing (in case of a puppet on a stick). As a rule, puppets do not have moving parts, except for Hong Dongji’s genitals (the universal feature of the character) and a local innovation manifesting in a blind puppet performance, i.e. in a visual effect of a scene with sight restoring, performed in such a way that puppeteers in a right moment pulls out a strip of white paper covering the puppet eyes (comp. Heo 2003: 369-370). Majority of (main) characters get a voice by puppeteers controlling them, except for supporting characters who are “almost

6 According to the narrator Kim Dong-ika, today’s puppet troupe leader, the practice of burning puppets was abandoned after they started to perform at puppet festivals across the province, during the 1990s, because they realized people recognized them by puppets.

like props in a play” (Heo 2003: 367). The play is performed in a local idiom, i.e. in a dialect spoken by inhabitants of the Seosan area.

Compared to the *kkokdugaksi noreum* (in the context of *namsandang nori* performed by a professional troupe), in which one or two people control all the puppets and give them voices, one of the local features is a large number of performers. The Seosan play Cheomji Nori Park is performed by six to seven puppeteers (Fig. 4) and up to a dozen members of the orchestra. In the past, not so many performers participated in the play; the number of performers has gradually increased thanks to the interest of local community members, who were eager to participate. Actually, one of the main features of the *intangible cultural heritage’s* phenomenon is the social convention dictating that anyone can be a performer if he/she meets certain preconditions. Primarily, a potential performer must know the text and must learn to control a puppet; in the modern context one of prerequisites is the existence of a free place in a troupe (comp. Heo 2003: 364). Women’s participation widespread during the late 1980s, and the community has gradually developed the attitude that it was better if women gave voices to female characters. It is also interesting, that a woman gives voice to a priest character, which can be considered yet another specific feature of the Park Cheomji Nori.

SAFEGUARDING OF THE SEOSAN PARK CHEOMJI NORI AS AN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Circumstances of the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori origin and development have still not been completely clarified. The very first researches, from the 1980s, resulted in a study based on social memory and interviews with Ju Yeonsan, the troupe leader at the time, described by one of researchers as a person “in advanced age of 86 with memory not serving him as before” (Seo 2017: 9).

According to Ju Yeonsan, in the 1920s, the *namsadangpae* Yoo Young Choon taught him the necessary skills, in the nearby Unsan-myeong district. For three years, he had been living in the village of Shinchang-ri, where he had perfected the skill of making puppets and performing at village festivities. After returning to Tapgok in the 1930s, he started to perform during holidays with the help of village youngsters (Seo 2017: 9-11). Today’s version of the play is believed to be generally shaped during the Japanese occupation period (from 1910 to 1954), but due to lack of written sources from that time, it is almost impossible to determine more precisely when it began (comp. Foley 2016: 188). From the mid-1930s till the end of the Korean War (from 1950 to 1953), the play was not performed due to difficult conditions for the local community. The troupe reunited after the war and started to perform regularly at village ceremonies, preparing a groundwork for the art transfer process to younger generations.

Ju Yeonsan died in 1990, and a role of the troupe leader was taken over by his student Kim Dong-ik, who has been performing this duty to this day, actively interpreting the role of Park Cheomji (Heo 2003: 379; Seo 2017: 9-11).

The 1980s were also significant for the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori because the play was broadcasted on television throughout Korea; after that, the play has been performed regularly at the Chuseok festivity and gradually became an important marker of the local community identity: “In other words, sociocultural significance of the play shifts from ‘entertainment for the villagers’ toward ‘pride or presentation of the village’” (Heo 2003: 380). Furthermore, changes on the social context background became even more significant after the play was included in the Register of intangible cultural heritage of Chungcheongnam Province, on 11th January 2000, under the number 26 (Heo 2003: 380; Cheon et al. [Ed.] 2010: 222).

Thanks to involvement of the Seosan city authorities in a form of financial and administrative assistance, in 2016, at outskirts of Tapgok, a Center with a basic objective to preserve the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori was established. A year later, the Center hosted the first puppet theater festival, accompanied by an expert meeting on the safeguarding of this specific phenomenon of *intangible cultural heritage*. I had the opportunity to participate personally at this event and conduct several interviews on safeguarding challenges with the leaders of Society for safeguarding of the Seosan Park Chomji Nori, the troupe leader Kim Dong-ik (the person legally registered as a holder) (Fig. 5) and his future successor, Yi Tae-su (Fig. 6).

According to them, the troupe currently consists of sixteen “permanent members” led by the Master Kim Dong-ik. At the formal level, the process of transferring knowledge to younger generations involves four teachers and three students, but the number of participants is not strictly limited because it is generally known that any member of the community can join them at any time. The concept of a permanent member refers to persons who actively participate at performing, who are the village residents and who are in the age between 40 and 70. Younger puppeteers take over the role in the play if someone moves away, gets sick, gives up due to advanced age or passes away.

Although the troupe members are not professionals, they have developed an informal system intended for financial consolidation, in order to maintain cohesion and prevent potential money disputes. Namely, after the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori was included in the regional list of intangible cultural heritage, persons recognized as holders and instructors involved in the process of art transfer have been remitted by the statutory financial support. As this measure did not cover all members of the troupe, they internally agreed that each person eligible for financial support would donate half the amount to a common fund from which the money would be distributed equally to the others. Yi Tae-su pointed out that community solidarity was the crucial issue for safeguarding of this heritage phenomenon; it was not a particular challenge given its homogeneity and relatively small number of members.

Kim Dong-ik explained that his task as the holder was to select potentially best heirs and provide them with all conditions to improve the skills of making puppets and performing in the play. During this process, they must follow his rules and instructions, and practice for years before getting a chance to perform in public. He also stressed that the process should be taken seriously and at the same time fun and enjoyment with the play should not be forgotten, because, it was *nori* (a play) after all. As an important thing, he

emphasized that according to his information some young locals stayed in the village just because of the possibility to learn and later perform in the play, and added that he had always believed that this phenomenon of *intangible cultural heritage* had been extremely important for the survival of the community. Finally, he expressed the wish that the Seosani Park Cheomji Nori would one day be included in the national Register of intangible cultural heritage, and the ambition to make it happen during his lifetime.

Today, the troupe performs about fifteen performances a year, and Yi Tae-su thinks they should perform even more. Reasons for such attitude are gaining experience, providing opportunities to younger members and promoting their village. Performances are held throughout the region that administratively belongs to the Seosan City, and majority of the troupe members would like to expand their activities on neighboring cities and municipalities. Despite this particular wish, the troupe members emphasized that the villagers had always been their best critics, warning them if the play was below the expected level of quality. Yi Tae-su pointed out that great progress had been made for the last ten years, in cooperation with local primary and secondary schools; pupils of these schools are the audience in front of which the troupe performs plays, prepares puppet workshops and other educational programs aimed at preserving and promoting the local heritage.

Most of locals claimed they considered Yi Tae-su the future leader of the troupe and the Society for safeguarding of the Seosan Park Chomji Nori, because of his contribution to many tangible achievements, especially the successful completion of the Center project; the Center turned to be a symbol of a community progress, driving force and the central place for numerous communal activities, from informal meetings to public events. It has a summer stage, a large hall for rehearsals and performances, and a lobby also used as an exhibition space, with mainly unused puppets and photographs of the troupe throughout history exhibited there. Although the idea of building the Center existed for decades, when construction works started many villagers were skeptical, especially after being provided with financial details. However, due to enthusiasm of Yi Tae-su the community successfully consolidated, and due to positive changes in the policies of the Seosan City authorities that recognized a desire to promote the Seosan City through the prism of culture and heritage, the Center opened its doors. After a year the local community generally supports the idea of the Seosan City authorities, but its representatives stress that additional financial investment as well as investment in the operational capacity are necessary. For example, one of the key challenges for the local community is how to manage the Center efficiently and effectively, given that it employs only one person being in charge of administrative tasks. This is evidenced by the fact that the Seosan city authorities in this area wish, tanks to visitors, to develop a cluster of heritage sites in order to ensure the base for the project self-sustainability. But, Tapgok residents are still unable to address these challenges on their own. They readily emphasize they have nothing against presenting their heritage to tourists, but they are also aware that such future could bring some inevitable changes.

Most of challenges concerning safeguarding processes of the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori arise from a relative incompatibility of the “old” value system and a modern way of

life in the Republic of Korea. First of all a teacher-student relationship established by a skill and knowledge transfer, based on a strict Confucian paradigm of relationships, is re-examined.

For example, the students' eagerness to perform Kim Dong-ik considers to be a challenge, because he feels they have not been ready yet and interprets it as ignoring the authority. On the other hand, Yi Tae-su points out that for successful safeguarding of the *intangible cultural heritage* phenomenon a slightly different approach should be developed; it should be the approach enabling all interested parties to participate and get further encourage during the process.

The very act of striving to preserve the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori as the *intangible cultural heritage* of Chungcheongnam Province has triggered a series of changes in this context. In addition to previously mentioned increase in the number of performances, not at the Chuseok festivity, the spatial context of the play itself has also changed. A simple outdoor scene, constructed by a fabric on a rope stretched between two trees has been replaced by a hall equipped as any modern theater. In other words, the play literally stepped into stage lights and that opened up certain challenges; first of all it is maintaining the original form of the phenomenon, the so-called *wonhyeong*, which continues to be a stumbling block in the implementation of safeguarding measures; this is particularly apparent in the afore highlighted attitude of different generations of heirs.

After the prestige emerged as a result of the successful inclusion of this *intangible cultural heritage* phenomenon into the regional register, the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori has not been considered any more a mere rural entertainment and has appropriated some artistic features. Very good example of this is making puppets that are becoming more and more refined, as a result of the makers who are eager to express their own skills level (comp. Heo 2003: 383-384, Aikawa-Faure 2014: 46). During the twentieth century, there was no such practice because the puppets were almost disposable, as they were used exclusively to perform the play at the Chuseok festivity and after that, in accordance with local beliefs, they were destroyed. Nowadays, the need for puppets is not limited to the festivity period, and the puppets are used for multiple performing or they become a *tangible heritage* exhibited in the lobby of the Center.

Changes in the performance, occurring as a result of a context changes are reflected in text modifications, too. Although both, Kim Dong-ik and Yi Tae-su stated that they insisted on the original content in the spirit of *wonhyeong* maintaining, they mentioned that there were some changes in the past that were soon abandoned because of the local audience disapproval. And opposed to that, some innovations have been embraced with great enthusiasm, such as a mechanism built into a blind man's puppet or women's participation, which opens up a space for questioning a purposefulness of the *wonhyeong* concept in terms of "heritage" norms the legislator insists on. Finally, certain text alternations were inevitable because the number of the rural dialect speakers (as the essential element of its original form) suffered a rapid decline, in the audience and in the performers themselves.

Some interventions in the original text should be perceived on the background of artistic production inspired by the *intangible cultural heritage* phenomenon. A few years ago, the Seosan theater performed the new Seosan Park Cheomji Nori, a shorter and much more dynamic adaptation of the play. Kim Dong-ik found this “intervention” very problematic because, in his opinion, among many other things, the audience was deprived of the original context experience. Nevertheless, he concluded in a conciliatory tone that “they do it based on fun and for fun, so it is a play”; such an attitude shows elements gradation concerning the value system of heirs who do take into account the *wonhyeong* concept, but do not give it any advantage in comparison to the social context.

CONCLUSION

The Seosan Park Cheomji Nori evolved from a *kkokdugaksi noreum* tradition in the first half of the 20th century into the only local specific puppet show performed by the amateur troupe composed of Tapgok village residents. Until the 1980s, it was unknown to the general public, and in 2000, after systematic researches, it was included in the *intangible cultural heritage* register of Chungcheongnam Province; that was the turning point after which the process of safeguarding the rural Park Cheomji Nori formally began. Fifteen years later, hoping to encourage the village development by including it on the tourist map of heritage sites, city authorities of the Seosan City invested into the Center construction; the Center with its rehearsal space, performances, workshops and events became a central gathering place for the community. However, although the Center functioning in the context of self-sustainability has emerged as a new challenge for the community, the indisputable fact is that it has consolidated its members around the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori, promoting it gradually as one of the most important markers of the local identity.

Perhaps the key criterion upon which an evaluation of the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori as an example of a stable process of safeguarding the *intangible cultural heritage* of the Republic of Korea at the regional level can be made is the subjective local community assessment. The locals believe that by the Center opening, the progress, expected since the phenomenon was included in the regional register, has been achieved, and they are especially pleased by Yi Tae-su being nominated as Kim Dong-ik’s successor. In other words, from their point of view, the System has fulfilled its task – the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori has a future. My opinion is that the community enthusiasm and solidarity is mainly built around the members’ inclusion model in a broader sense than just participating in the play. As the troupe members pointed out, the community is the best critic, and the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori project is the communal project.

On the other hand, one of the most serious challenges is how to reconcile the System imperative of preserving the original form of the phenomenon (*wonhyeong*) caused by context changes. Despite the fact that the community supported certain interventions in the past (for example, women’s participation), the very act of elevating the *intangible cultural heritage* safeguarding system to the regional level, as well as the open perform-

ers' ambitions to raise the preservation of the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori to the national level, imply certain measures questioning the same community decision.

The key question is can the original form be standardized at all, especially having in mind necessary interventions implemented after including the Seosan Park Cheomji Nori into the regional register. In other words, is the Safeguarding System itself a potential threat to the preservation process? Or as Yang warns: "...changes of social circumstances, manifesting in the particular phenomenon of the *intangible cultural heritage* should be evident in its contemporary form, because public interest in its petrified form will disappear, because today's audience does not have the same taste as the past one." (Yang 2003: 12)

Although this question has arisen from the context of a discussion on the Korean system, it has actually been a global one. In addition, it is illusory to think that it is possible to give a universal answer to it. However, during researches in the Republic of Korea, I witnessed the specific case of an indirect promotion of the *intangible cultural heritage* to a younger audience, referring in a certain way to the Yang's warning. At the National Gugak Center⁷ in Seoul I had the opportunity to watch the puppet show *Park Cheomji Returns* produced by SaniNeomeo Theater Company, that combines a traditional template with a contemporary musical and dance expression. For example, in one scene a puppet dressed in a basketball jersey performs a hip-hop number, while in another girls characters (*pjori*) sing inspired by rhythm of globally popular song *Gangnam Style* of the Korean performer PSY. The play was intended for preschool or elementary school children (marked 3+) and it was evident that small children lost concentration during dialogue or dance sections based on a traditional template, focusing their attention on toys they brought or on parents' phones. However, flashes of familiar content brought them back to the show. The example shows that the original play form must rely on modern interpretive tools in order to become interesting for the audience to which it is intended. In the context of safeguarding the *intangible cultural heritage*, it is important to emphasize that new generations need a broader picture, or how Kim Dong-ik emphasized many times - *nori* should be *nori*.

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