

Article

The Structural Paradox of the Shamanic Healing Ritual: Relational Displacement and the Search for Transcendence in Korean Spirituality

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Abstract

This article explores the structural paradox of the *byeong-gut* (Korean shamanic healing ritual): why it adheres to the rigid and canonical format of the *jaesu-gut* (shamanic blessing ritual) instead of adopting a specialized clinical procedure. Critiquing the instrumental trap of previous scholarship that reduces shamanic healing to psychological comfort or social liberation, this study proposes a relational displacement model by integrating Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual invariance with the relational ontologies of Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold. The article demonstrates that shamanic healing operates through a dual mechanism. First, at the non-discursive (material) level, the ritual functions as an ontological technology that objectifies and displaces individual suffering onto external surrogates. Second, at the discursive (linguistic) level, a meticulous analysis of the *manse-baji* (invocation chant) illustrates how the patient's fragmented life is re-assembled into a meshwork of human and non-human agencies. Ultimately, this article argues that the *byeong-gut* transcends mere functional curing; it serves as a sophisticated knowledge system that re-maps the isolated ego onto a relational cosmology, transforming the Geertzian bafflement of suffering into an intelligible event within a shared and sacred cosmic order.

Keywords: Korean shamanism; *byeong-gut*; relational displacement; canonical invariance; *manse-baji*; Bruno Latour; Tim Ingold

1. Introduction: Shamanic Discourse and the Relational Framework of Korean Spirituality

The landscape of Korean spirituality has long been characterized not by an adherence to rigid dogmas or internal belief systems, but by what Baker (2008) describes as a relational matrix. In this framework, religious practice is less about the private salvation of an isolated soul and more about maintaining the harmonious balance of a social and cosmic network that includes the living, the dead, and the myriad spirits of the land. Within this relational orientation, Korean shamanism (*musok*) stands as the most dynamic arena where these invisible associations are rendered visible and negotiable.¹

In recent decades, however, while the academic and popular interest in Korean shamanism has diversified to include its aesthetic and performative dimensions, the discourse has remained principally preoccupied with the theme of healing. While this therapeutic turn has helped grant *musok* a degree of modern intellectual legitimacy, it has paradoxically led to what I define as the instrumentalization of the ritual. By framing shamanic



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practice primarily through the lenses of depth psychology and feminist sociology, previous scholarship has often reduced the ritual to a mere tool—either for the internal resolution of the individual psyche or for social liberation from patriarchal oppression. In these accounts, the elaborate presence of deities and ancestors is frequently relegated to the status of symbolic metaphors or psychological projections, stripping the ritual of its inherent cosmological agency.

This study begins with a fundamental question that these instrumentalist frameworks fail to answer: If the objective of the ritual is merely internal psychic healing or social emancipation, why does the healing ritual (*byeong-gut*) persist in a form that is nearly identical to the blessing ritual (*jaesu-gut*)? Why must the shaman invoke an expansive and seemingly redundant pantheon of comprehensive deities who appear to have no direct clinical relation to the patient's specific illness?

I argue that this apparent redundancy is, in fact, what I define as an ontological technology essential for healing. By this term, I refer not to modern engineering or instrumental technologies, but to the ritual-material mechanisms through which suffering is objectified, redistributed, and integrated into a cosmological order. According to Rappaport (1999), the formal and invariant structures of ritual establish sanctity by aligning the individual with a canonical order that transcends private distress. In this light, the exhaustive invocation of the shamanic pantheon serves to anchor the chaotic experience of illness within an eternal and invariant framework.

To address this redundancy, this article proposes a shift from an instrumental model of healing to a relational cosmology. I argue that shamanic healing—centrally embodied by the practices of the *mudang* (Korean shaman)—is not a clinical intervention aimed at the subject's interiority, but a technological process of relational displacement. Crucially, this article demonstrates that this displacement is achieved through a dual mechanism: the non-discursive (material) and the discursive (linguistic). Drawing on Latour's (2005) notion of distributed agency and Ingold's (2000) relational ontology, I suggest that suffering in the Korean context is not owned by the individual; rather, it is a distributed phenomenon arising from breached associations within a hybrid network of human and non-human actors—a phenomenon that I ultimately conceptualize as an ontological reconfiguration.

This analytical framework inevitably brings into dialogue several theoretical traditions with distinct intellectual lineages. While Rappaport's ritual theory operates within a systems-oriented framework that emphasizes canonical stability and formal invariance, Latour and Ingold foreground relational processes, distributed agency, and dynamic meshworks. Rather than treating these perspectives as incompatible, however, this article approaches them as complementary for the analysis of ritual practice. Rappaport's concept of ritual formality provides the authoritative and structured framework—the very condition of possibility—within which the processes described by Latour and Ingold can occur. In this sense, ritual invariance does not stand in opposition to relational transformation; rather, it furnishes the stable platform through which both the material and discursive reconfiguration of suffering become possible.

To develop this argument, the article first traces a critical genealogy of shamanic discourse to expose the instrumental trap inherent in prevailing psychological and sociological interpretations. Following this, the discussion provides a multi-layered analysis of ritual form and practice. First, it examines the non-discursive dimension of ritual—focusing on formal invariance and the use of material surrogates—to show how individual suffering is objectified and displaced through ontological technology. Second, it explores the discursive dimension through a meticulous analysis of the *manse-baji* (invocation chant), illustrating how the patient's life is linguistically re-woven into a relational meshwork. By integrating Rappaport's theory of sanctity and canonical messages with these material

and linguistic perspectives, the article demonstrates how ritual formality provides the authoritative framework necessary for cosmological reconfiguration. Ultimately, the study concludes that shamanic healing in Korea is the restoration of a relational cosmology that transcends the boundaries of the individual self.

2. Beyond Instrumentalism: A Relational Displacement Model of Shamanic Healing

The theme of ‘shamanism and healing’ must be understood as a discursive construct shaped by the historical trajectory of the Western imagination. Since the late 17th century, the interpretation of shamanic practice has shifted from Christian demonization to Enlightenment medicalization, where ecstasy was categorized as a mental disorder (Hamayon 1998). This evolutionary and clinical confidence of the 18th century effectively othered the shaman as an object of pathological observation.

However, a significant counter-discourse emerged during the Romantic era. As Znamenski (2007) notes, Romantic thinkers influenced by J.G. Herder and Novalis viewed nature as a living organism and the shamanic experience as a vital link between humanity and the cosmos, reimagining the shaman as a noble primitive or a model of spiritual wholeness. For the Romantics, the shaman’s ecstasy was not a symptom of pathology, but a realization of the complete human model capable of bridging the gap between the mundane and the universal.

This Romantic lineage, which emphasized the harmony between nature and the human psyche, found its 20th-century successor in depth psychology. C.G. Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, moved away from the clinical reductionism of the Enlightenment, instead inheriting the Romantic ideal of psychological wholeness. From Jung’s perspective, the shamanic experience—including the state of being possessed by a guardian spirit—is interpreted as a manifestation of the individuation process, through which the subject develops the internal psychic structures necessary for a complete spiritual personality (Jung [1954] 1967). In this framework, the diverse symbols and deities of shamanism are understood essentially as projections of the collective unconscious, serving the ultimate goal of psychic integration. By framing shamanic experience as a path to a complete personality, Jung granted it a degree of spiritual legitimacy. However, his psychological framework provided a potent theoretical basis for a subsequent internalization of ritual practices. While Jung himself did not analyze Korean shamanic rituals specifically, his emphasis on the internal psychic drama led later scholars to transpose the cosmic and relational events of the ritual into the private and internal domain of the individual psyche.

Within the field of Korean shamanism studies, this internalizing gaze is most clearly inherited by research rooted in psychology and psychoanalysis. A preeminent example is found in the work of Rhi Bou-yong, who sought to bridge the experiential world of the *mudang* with the theoretical framework of C.G. Jung. He defines the *mudang* as a “guide of souls who mediates between the living and the dead through a state of possession” (Rhi 2012, pp. 29–30). Consistent with the Jungian shift toward interiority, however, Rhi transposes this spiritual mediation into a psychological process, analogizing the shaman’s dialogue with spirits (*hon*) to a confrontation with the Self. In this view, the diverse deities and ancestors encountered in the *gut* (Korean shamanic ritual) are interpreted not as external agents, but as manifestations of the collective unconscious or symbolic projections of the individuation process. He suggests that the ritual allows the patient to integrate these fragmented archetypal images into a unified psyche, achieving a state of wholeness. Consequently, psychological concepts such as projection of the unconscious, catharsis, and self-suggestion often became the primary analytical tools for explaining shamanic efficacy.

Alongside these psychological interpretations, another influential body of scholarship analyzes Korean shamanic rituals through a sociological and feminist lens. These studies shift the focus from the individual's internal psyche to the collective social conditions of women in Korea. Scholars in this tradition often interpret *sinbyeong* (spirit sickness) and its ritual resolution, particularly the *naerim-gut* (initiation ritual), as a symbolic response to the structural oppression and marginalized status of women within a patriarchal society. Pioneered by the foundational studies of Harvey (1979) and Kendall (1985), this line of inquiry frames the ritual arena as crucial socio-psychological space where Korean women actively negotiate domestic anxieties, patriarchal subjugation, and peripheral social standing. From this perspective, the ritual is seen as a vehicle for transforming private suffering into social agency. It is even argued that “the *naerim-gut* is more than a simple folk healing ritual; it is a process of socialization as well as self-liberation for Korean women” (J. Kim 1994, p. 54). In this framework, healing is redefined as the restoration of social identity and the acquisition of a legitimate voice within the community.

However, this reliance on both psychological and sociological frameworks often falls into what I define as an instrumental trap. Despite their significant differences in explanatory orientation—particularly regarding psychic interiority versus structural-social oppression—both approaches ultimately tend to interpret ritual primarily in terms of what it accomplishes for the human subject. While the focus on internal resolution or social liberation provides essential insights into the human dimensions of the ritual, both perspectives share a common reductive tendency: they treat the ritual exclusively as an instrumental tool designed to achieve a non-ritual end—be it a stable psyche or a liberated social status.

This instrumentalism creates a significant analytical blind spot; it cannot explain why the *byeong-gut* persists in a complex, expensive, and expansive form that is nearly identical to the *jaesu-gut*. If the objective were merely to integrate the Jungian Self or to provide an escape from patriarchal oppression, the meticulous invocation of the expansive shamanic pantheon—comprising various deities and spirits who appear seemingly unrelated to the specific illness or social grievance—would be structurally redundant. To resolve this, we must move beyond these reductions toward the expressive dimension of the ritual (Middleton 1967). We must view the *byeong-gut* not as a clinical intervention or a sociological strategy, but as an ontological communication of a relational cosmology.

This shift entails a fundamental movement toward a model of distributed suffering. Theoretically grounded in contemporary discourses on distributed agency—which build significantly upon Latour's (2005) relational network theory and broader socio-technological frameworks—this study suggests that the capacity to produce or alleviate suffering is not a property of the discrete human individual but is an effect emerging from a network of heterogeneous associations. Suffering, therefore, is not owned by the person; it is a distributed phenomenon that arises when the balance of these relationships is breached. As Ingold (2000) suggests, beings are formed through their ongoing engagements with others, making suffering a relational condition that requires ritual mediation rather than mere moral correction.

At first glance, this concept of distributed suffering might appear to resonate with sociological theories of social suffering, which frame individual distress as a product of collective structural oppression. However, a crucial ontological distinction exists. While the sociological lens restricts the scope of suffering to the dynamics of human power and social structure, relational displacement expands this scope into a hybrid network of both human and non-human agency. In the *byeong-gut*, suffering is not merely a social grievance to be resolved through self-liberation; it is an ontological weight that must be redistributed across a cosmic hierarchy. Unlike the sociological model, which ultimately seeks to empower the human subject within society, relational displacement seeks to displace the bur-

den of the subject onto what Martin (2004, pp. 140–59) terms the “optimal” and “patronal” universes: the former referring to a cosmological order structured by fate and ontological hierarchy, and the latter to a protective network of spirits and ancestral mediators. Thus, the distribution of suffering here is not a social metaphor but a cosmological reconfiguration of the self’s exposure to a world populated by spirits, ancestors, and cosmic destiny.

If suffering is understood as such a distributed phenomenon within this hybrid network, then ritual healing must function as a strategic intervention to rearrange these broken or burdensome associations. To describe the specific mechanism of this intervention—one that moves the weight of suffering across the cosmological hierarchy—I propose the concept of relational displacement. Resonating with Lévi-Strauss’s (1963) “symbolic effectiveness” and the mechanisms of displacement suggested by Girard (1977), this term refers to the ritual mechanism through which the burden of suffering is strategically moved from the interiority of the moral subject to the exteriority of a relational network.² In the shamanic ritual, this weight is displaced onto a dual cosmological structure consisting of the optimal universe and the patronal universe. The optimal universe structures the ethical and ontological hierarchies of destiny (*unse*), while the patronal universe facilitates negotiation with the spirits and ancestors who act as supernatural protectors. Through relational displacement, the shaman reinterprets internal distress as a manageable problem within these external universes, where suffering can be negotiated, bartered with, and eventually redistributed among multiple actors (D. Kim 2025).

By foregrounding this shift from internal transformation to ritual reconfiguration, we can achieve a comprehensive understanding of how human vulnerability is addressed in the Korean context. If relational displacement serves as the conceptual mechanism for managing suffering, how is this displacement rendered authoritative and ontologically real for the participants? To understand this process of sanctification, I now turn to the formal structure of the ritual itself. By analyzing the *byeong-gut* through Rappaport’s (1999) theory of ritual formality, the following chapter will demonstrate how the strategic adoption of the *jaesu-gut* format acts as a canonical framework that effectively redistributes the weight of individual suffering across the spiritual network, transforming a private crisis into a public and sanctified cosmic event.

3. Invariance as Ontological Technology: Evidence of Relational Displacement in Ritual Form

3.1. The Structural Paradox: Canonical Invariance and Individual Permeation

The structural analysis of the *byeong-gut* reveals a profound paradox: while the ritual aims to resolve a highly and acute physical crisis, it maintains a rigid and invariant sequence that is virtually indistinguishable from a general *jaesu-gut*. This formal rigidity reflects what Rappaport (1999) identifies as invariance—the performance of more or less predetermined sequences of formal acts and utterances. In his framework, this invariance is the essential vehicle for “canonical messages,” which are not coded by the immediate participants but are instead received from a perceived eternal or ancestral source (Rappaport 1999, pp. 52–53). As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of the ritual is dedicated to the foundational structure, reinforcing a sense of canonical stability. However, a closer examination of the *gongsu* (oracular utterances delivered by the possessed shaman)—even within segments that appear unrelated to healing—reveals that the supplicant’s specific illness is constantly addressed and interwoven into the performance. This suggests that the invariance of the ritual form does not exclude the permeation of individual suffering; rather, the two coexist to facilitate a unique shamanic mode of resolution.

Table 1. Structural Distribution of Healing Acts within the Ritual Sequence.

Ritual Category	Case 1. Mr. Kim (Hwanghae-do Style)	Case 2. Grandfather Jeon (Northern Gyeonggi-do Style)
I. Foundational Structure (Universal Blessing & Order)	(1) Sinchong-ullim (Inviting deities) (2) Sangsan-maji (Welcoming mountain gods) (3) Chobujeong (Purification) (4) Yeongjeong-mullim (Expelling minor spirits) (5) Chilseong-jeseok (Destiny & Longevity) (6) Seongju/Sodaegam (House & Wealth) (9) Igeun-tasal (Feast for ancestors and all deities) (10) Daegam-geori (Wealth/Prosperity)	(1) Haengju-mullim (Cleansing the path) (2) Bujeong-geori (Purification) (3) Josang-geori (Ancestors) (4) Daegam-geori (Wealth/Abundance) (5) Bulsa-geori (Buddhist-shamanic deities) (7) Seongju-geori (Household god) (8) Changbu-geori (Entertainment) (9) Teoju-geori (Earth god) (10) Gunung-geori (Soldier Official)
II. Embedded Healing Acts (Specific Intervention)	(7) Saeng-tasal (Gunung)-geori (8) Seongsu-geori (Expelling malevolent spirits)	(6) San-geori (Singjang segment) (Expelling malevolent spirits using flags, grains, pig's legs, ritual knife, and so on)
III. final Resolution (Dismissing Spirits)	(12) Dwit-jeon (Wandering spirits)	(11) Dwit-jeon (Wandering spirits)

In February 2018, Mr. Kim³, a 49-year-old male employee at a broadcasting station, commissioned a *gut* (Korean shamanic ritual) from the *mudang* Dani⁴. For several months, he had suffered from chronic insomnia and a visibly haggard complexion, leading a senior colleague to suggest a consultation with the *mudang*. Despite having been prescribed tranquilizers and sleeping pills, Mr. Kim's symptoms had not improved; as his senior colleague remarked to me in Mr. Kim's presence, it appeared to be "the kind of illness that cannot be cured by medicine alone."

The first consultation between Dani and Mr. Kim took place in August 2017. According to Dani's divination—as Mr. Kim later recounted to me—he faced two primary issues: first, the problem of *gunung* (spirits of violent death) that had attached to him at a crematorium while he was mourning a deceased actor friend, and second, the "entry of a light-emitting object" into his home—a souvenir purchased during a trip to Southeast Asia in 2016. Furthermore, his family history was marked by premature deaths—his grandfather passed away in his 40s and his father in his 50s—suggesting an ominous tradition that might be transferred to Mr. Kim. Consequently, the *mudang* diagnosed that a *gut* was necessary to appease the *gunung* and expel the evil spirits (*sagwi*) from the household. However, in 2017, Mr. Kim decided against it. He later told me that he feared becoming overly dependent on the *mudang* for future decisions, which might compromise his sense of autonomy. He also dismissed the idea of a Southeast Asian spirit, as he claimed to dislike traveling to that region and insisted he had only visited Europe in 2016.

The direct catalyst for Mr. Kim finally commissioning the *gut* in 2018 was witnessing the sudden accidental death of a fellow producer from another station. This traumatic event linked his own fate to the premature deaths of his father and grandfather, triggering a sudden premonition of his own demise. Moreover, while he had forgotten his Southeast Asian trip at the time of the 2017 consultation, he later discovered computer files confirming the trip and identified a gold-colored bowl he had purchased there. The realization that facts he himself had forgotten were revealed through the *mudang's* lips, combined with the trauma of his colleague's death, undoubtedly increased the perceived veracity of Dani's divination. Thus, the *gut* was finally performed.

Despite Mr. Kim's protracted physical debilitation and the persistent neurological distress attributed to the intrusion of the *gunung* and other malevolent spirits, the *gut* performed for him strictly followed the standard sequence of a *jaesu-gut*. Rather than employing a specialized and abbreviated procedure focused solely on symptomatic relief, the ritual maintained the expansive liturgical structure typically used to invoke comprehensive blessings for a household. The ritual segments were as follows: (1) *Sinchong-ullim* (shaking the spirit-bell to invite the deities), (2) *Sangsan-maji* (welcoming the gods of the high mountains), (3) *Chobujeong/Chogamheung-geori* (initial purification and divine invocation), (4) *Yeongjeong-mullim* (expelling minor spirits), (5) *Chilseong-jeseok-geori* (invoking the deities of destiny and longevity), (6) *Seongju/Sodaegam-geori* (blessing the household and wealth), (7) *Saengtasal-geori* (or *Gunung-geori*) (the living sacrifice to pacify the warrior spirits), (8) *Seongsu-geori* (invoking the General and the Warrior-gods to expel domestic malevolence), (9) *Igeun-tasal* (or *Gamheung-geori*) (the cooked sacrifice to satisfy gods and ancestors), (10) *Daegam-geori* (venerating the greedy and powerful spirits of abundance), (11) *Josang-geori* (communing with the family ancestors), (12) *Dwit-jeon* (appeasing the miscellaneous wandering spirits).

While this structure represents a typical Hwanghae-do style *jaesu-gut* aimed at securing general prosperity and peace, the segments directly related to Mr. Kim's immediate healing were primarily the (7) *Gunung-geori* and (8) *Seongsu-geori*. These specific segments involved pacifying the spirits from the crematorium and invoking the General deities to expel the source of the illness. The fact that the majority of the ritual was devoted to comprehensive blessings—rather than the specific ailment—highlights the core question of why the *byeong-gut* insists on maintaining this expansive and canonical format.

This structural paradox—where a ritual specifically intended for healing (*byeong-gut*) adopts the standard sequence of a *jaesu-gut* and even takes on the atmosphere of a festive banquet—is not an isolated phenomenon. The case of the Jeon family—referred to as the Chŏn family in Kendall's (1985) original account—provides a corroborating example. Grandfather Jeon fell ill after an outing, and when medical treatments failed, the family consulted a *mansin* (an honorific term for a Korean shaman). The divination revealed that a deceased family member who had practiced shamanism was residing in the house as *Daesin-halmeoni* (Great Spirit Grandmother). Because the family had neglected the triennial *gut* for her for over five years, she had become enraged, expressing her anger through the grandfather's illness to demand a ritual. In response to this crisis, the subsequent healing ritual was organized; however, its structure did not deviate from the traditional sequence of a general *gut*.

Table 1 re-categorizes the ritual sequences of both cases into functional layers to highlight the structural relationship between comprehensive blessings and specific healing interventions. As shown in the table, both cases demonstrate that while the rituals were specifically performed for healing, they adhered to the standard sequence of segments typical of their respective regional traditions. Despite these regional variations, the ritual segments directly related to the immediate crisis (marked in bold)—whether occurring as independent segments or embedded within broader sequences—occupy only a small fraction of the entire performance.

As clearly illustrated in Table 1, regardless of the regional stylistic differences between the Hwanghae-do and Northern Gyeonggi-do traditions, a consistent structural pattern emerges. Although both rituals were commissioned with the primary objective of curing a specific illness, the overwhelming majority of the ritual performance comprises the standard sequence typical of a general *gut*.

It is crucial to recognize, however, that the foundational structure identified in the table is not a hollow vessel. While these segments maintain their canonical names and se-

quences, the actual *gongsu* is deeply permeated with references to the supplicant's specific suffering and illness. This demonstrates that the physical crisis of an individual cannot be overcome by bypassing the cosmological order. Instead, it is through interweaving the particular suffering of the supplicant into the very fabric of the established ritual framework that healing becomes possible.

Through this permeation within invariance, the ritual operates as a complex system of knowledge that navigates between two distinct yet overlapping cosmological metaphors. On one hand, the ritual invokes a patronal universe, materialized through the shamanic pantheon—spirits like *Samsin* (the goddess of childbirth), *Chilseong* (the Seven Stars), and *Sinjang* (the Warrior-gods)—who actively intervene in every aspect of human life from birth to death. Here, healing is sought through the restoration of reciprocal relationships and active guardianship, where the *gongsu* reaffirms a bond of mutual exchange between the human and the divine. On the other hand, contemporary shamans frequently employ the vocabulary of an optimal universe, such as *unse* (wheel of fortune), *samjae* (the three calamitous year), and *saju-palja* (the four pillars of destiny). This cosmology represents a belief in an inherently ordered cosmos where life's events are not random accidents but part of a pre-existing ontological and ethical rhythm. In this framework, suffering is often understood as a predestined or scheduled crisis within the cosmic cycle.⁵ By providing an explanatory system where pain is seen as a destined event, the ritual helps the supplicant to understand and accept their affliction rather than being overwhelmed by its apparent meaninglessness. This aligns with Geertz's (1973, p. 100) assertion that religion serves to overcome the "bafflement" arising from intellectual ignorance, imbuing even the most painful experiences with a sense of order and significance.

Ultimately, the *byeong-gut* operates by simultaneously negotiating with the patronal web of reciprocal spiritual bonds and aligning with the optimal universe's predestined order. Healing, in this shamanic sense, is the dual process of seeking active protection from the gods while gaining the spiritual insight to embrace one's fate as a meaningful part of a broader and sacred harmony.

3.2. Embedded Healing: The Intersection of Invariance and Intervention

As observed in the case of Mr. Kim, the healing ritual for the Jeon family was also fundamentally driven by the practical goal of curing illness. Consequently, it employed various linguistic and performative devices specifically designed to diagnose the patient's condition and manifest therapeutic effects. These performative devices were repeated whenever Grandfather Jeon entered the ritual space, and their contents can be summarized from Kendall's ethnographic description (Kendall 1985, pp. 1–22) as follows:

During the *Sinjang-geori* (the segment for the Warrior gods), which is part of the *San-geori* (the segment for the mountain gods), the *mudang* seated Grandfather Jeon on the wooden floor and covered his head with five-colored flags (*obanggi*), the yellow cloth, and his own shirt. She then scattered various grains over him, circled him with a pig's leg, and brandished a ritual knife to expel the malevolent energy believed to be surrounding his body (Kendall 1985, pp. 14–15). Following this procedure, she had Grandfather Jeon personally pull a flag from the *obanggi* set. When he drew the white flag, she delivered a powerful and positive message: "All right!" (ibid., p. 15), signifying that his illness would be cured. Furthermore, toward the conclusion of the ritual, the ceremony moved outdoors. Again, Grandfather Jeon's head was covered with the yellow cloth and his shirt. The *mudang* circled his head with a live chicken, rubbed it against his body, and finally threw it away toward the outside. This was followed by placing bits of ritual food in a gourd, tossing them over the grandfather's shoulder, and swinging a kitchen knife through the air around his head and shoulders before throwing it outward. Finally, the yellow cloth

that had covered his head was torn away around his chest. The chicken used in the ritual was then buried on a mountain, as if burying a human corpse, and the yellow cloth and shirt were ritually burned (ibid., p. 19).

In this context, Grandfather Jeon's shirt functions as a metonymy for the grandfather himself, serving as a ritual device that carries away the forces of illness and death in his stead. In the tradition of Korean shamanism, this is referred to as *Daesu-daemyeong* (代壽代命)—literally meaning the substitution of one's fate or life for another. This scene vividly illustrates how the relational displacement proposed in this study is materialized through concrete physical objects. Crucially, the use of these items—the vast majority of which are mundane, everyday items such as shirts, grains, chickens, and kitchen knives—within metaphorical and metonymic operations does not reduce them to mere human-centric symbols or passive surrogates. Rather, within the relational cosmology of the *gut*, these objects become material mediators that capture, transfer, and redistribute invisible spiritual forces. Their metaphorical and metonymic capacities function not as signs detached from reality, but as practical mechanisms through which spiritual forces are objectified, bound, and displaced across the ritual network. Agency in this article is therefore understood not as an inherent property of isolated subjects, but as a relational effect co-produced through the strategic material mobilization of these non-human actors.

This process transcends a purely instrumental function, such as providing psychological stability through a placebo effect or autosuggestion. Rather, it represents a unique shamanic ontological technology that displaces the locus of suffering from the isolated individual to an external surrogate. By doing so, the ritual reconfigures the pain—once trapped within the patient's subjective interiority—into a manageable and negotiable domain within the broader cosmic network. This relational displacement serves as the practical mechanism through which the two universes identified in the previous section converge. While the use of a surrogate (the chicken or the shirt) acknowledges the inescapable weight of the optimal predestined order, the act of substitution itself activates the patronal agency of the gods to intervene and protect. In this intersection of invariance and intervention, healing is manifested not as a denial of fate, but as a strategic re-negotiation of one's place within the universal hierarchy. This material re-negotiation through objects lays the groundwork for the discursive re-entanglement that will be further explored in the next chapter.

3.3. *Gongsu as a Knowledge System: Interweaving Suffering into the Relational Cosmos*

However, a persistent question remains: why were the standard segments of shamanic ritual fully performed in both Mr. Kim's and Grandfather Jeon's cases, despite their primary goal being healing? It is noteworthy that ritual performances seemingly irrelevant to the practical end of healing occupied a significantly larger portion of the overall ritual structure. Therefore, to understand the *byeong-gut* comprehensively, one must look beyond the instrumental devices related to the immediate goal of curing and focus on the general characteristics of the ritual and the messages it seeks to convey.

According to Rappaport (1999), ritual is explicitly characterized by formality and invariance. This does not imply that these features are fixed prototypes from which no deviation is permitted. Rather, through its performative nature, a ritual can evolve like a musical variation depending on the practitioner. Nevertheless, ritual differs from ordinary behavior in its high degree of invariance and formality. In Korean shamanic traditions, these characteristics are manifested in rituals like *naerim-gut*, *jaesu-gut*, and *jinjeok-gut* (a regular ritual of gratitude performed by a shaman for their own tutelary deities), where the basic structural framework is maintained, and all relevant deities are invoked and offered hospitality without exception. As seen in Mr. Kim's ritual, the specific deities invoked,

the composition of the ritual segments, and the sequence—where the *manse-baji* (invocation chant) is followed by the *heullim-gongsu* (fragment first-person oracle delivered during transitions), dancing, and finally the *gin-gongsu* (extended oracle)—constitute an invariant law and formal structure of the Hwanghae-do tradition, regardless of the ritual's specific purpose. Grandfather Jeon's ritual similarly adhered to the formality of the regional tradition in which it was rooted.

Rappaport (1999, p. 46) specifically notes that “the term ‘formal’ is also meant to contrast with the ‘functional,’ or, to be more precise, with the physically efficacious.” Building on this, he further argues that the essence of the sacred is its “unquestionableness,” which is “an entailment of both canonical invariance and its performance” (Rappaport 1999, p. 344). Seen in this light, while the *byeong-gut* addresses the immediate practical goal of healing, it transcends mere physical efficacy by anchoring the supplicant's crisis within the invariant and formal structure of the *jaesu-gut*. This process effectively transforms an idiosyncratic physical suffering into a manageable event within an unquestionable cosmological order.

This distinction is clearly observable in contemporary practice; even during a ritual for healing, shamans often recommend that patients seek medical prescriptions for physical ailments from hospitals. The message the *mudang* delivers through the ritual is focused not on biological intervention, but rather on the relationship between invisible entities and human life, and the reaffirmation of that connection. Although shamanic rituals are categorized differently based on region or practitioner, they can be viewed as variations on a single theme that permeates the entire tradition. As a variation on the *jaesu-gut*—the most common form of Korean shamanic ritual—the *byeong-gut* articulates a shared belief system regarding the causes and treatment of illness, thereby constituting what Rappaport calls the canonical message of shamanic ritual.

Ultimately, the *byeong-gut* adopts the format of a *jaesu-gut* to transmit a canonical message that transcends the instrumental purpose of curing. While acknowledging the necessity of modern medical treatment, the *mudang* uses the ritual to reaffirm the reciprocal bonds between human life and the deities (patronal universe) and to align the supplicant with their inherent destiny (optimal universe). By proclaiming this message through strict formality and invariance, the ritual allows individual suffering to be re-interpreted not as a random catastrophe, but as an intelligible event within a cosmic order. This process effectively overcomes what Geertz calls bafflement—the unbearable sense of meaninglessness in the face of suffering. Consequently, the *byeong-gut* is elevated from a mere act of treatment to a sacred knowledge system that re-maps the individual onto a relational and harmonious cosmos.

4. Discursive Relational Exposure: The *Manse-Baji* and the Mechanism of Displacement

While the previous chapter analyzed the non-discursive formality of the *byeong-gut* through the lens of canonical invariance, this chapter shifts its focus to the discursive dimension of the ritual. If the invariant structure provides a stable stage, it is through the linguistic performance—specifically the *manse-baji*—that the actual relational exposure of the patient occurs. Here, the ritual is not merely a repetition of fixed meanings but a dynamic site of articulation (Latour 2005), where the private pain of the individual is brought into a communicative meshwork with non-human agencies. In this discursive space, we observe a process of relational displacement that goes beyond mere symbolic representation. Drawing on Ingold's (2000) notion of the meshwork, the *manse-baji* can be seen as a linguistic weaving where the frayed lines of a patient's life are re-entangled with the enduring paths of the deities. The patient's symptoms are not just reported; they are exposed and then displaced onto the spiritual collective through the rhythmic call-and-response

format. By analyzing the *manse-baji* as a discursive mechanism, this chapter demonstrates how shamanic oracles transform the bafflement of a solitary illness into a shared trajectory within a relational cosmos.

A compelling illustration of this process is found in the records of Rhi and Seo (1994), who documented a healing ritual performed by the late *mansin* Kim Keum-hwa. The client was a private taxi driver whose life had begun to unravel after he overexerted himself for three days at a close friend's funeral. His crisis manifested as a complex of psychosomatic issues—including debilitating chest tightness and insomnia—as well as a series of life-threatening traffic accidents. While the ritual's structural procedure remained canonically invariant, reflecting the stable tradition discussed earlier, it is the discursive performance within the *manse-baji* of the *Chilseong-jeseok-geori* that facilitates the actual transformation of his suffering. In the *manse-baji*, the driver's private bafflement is translated into a shared dialogue with the deities, effectively re-mapping his life onto a vibrant field of social and cosmic agencies. The *manse-baji* presented below, categorized here to distinguish the message content, articulates this synthesis of personal crisis and universal order.⁶

(1) Sanctification of the Ritual Space

"We go to receive, we go to receive, we go to receive the Lord Jeseok/From the heavens and earth, sun and moon, to the Southern Continent (Jambudvīpa) of this Saha World/In the Kingdom of Joseon, in the twenty-three districts of Hwanghae-do/At the designated place of the King, at the authorized shrine of the Bugun-nim/Residing in Donam-dong, Seongbuk-gu, Hanyang/The residence of the Hong family..."

(2) Sanctification of the Ritual Time

"The year is the Gye-u year, the month is May, and the day is the twelfth/Going to receive the Sein-Jeseok/Preparing the Yeongcheon for this play/Choosing the auspicious day (sang-nal), selecting the day at Wolcheongang/Grasping the hour through the Eight Trigrams of I-Ching, sorting out the vital energy (Saenggi) and virtue (Bokdeok)... To buy life, to buy fortune..."

(3) Human Effort and Sincere Devotion

"Spreading pine needles at the front gate, scattering yellow earth at the back gate/Closing the four main gates tight, seven days of devotion, five days of abstinence/Entering on the third day, preparing for today (geum-il), lighting the scent of golden incense/Lest an impure human enters, lest a pure human leaves/With the master's strength and the mistress's devotion/We prepare this divine service..."

(4) Invocation of the Deities

"Gather, gather, let the Jeseok deities gather/Ilgwang Jeseok, Wolgwang Jeseok, let the immortal Jeseok and the Gods of Heaven and Earth descend/Seolbeop Jeseok of Heaven and Earth, Bokrip Jeseok established for humans/Pungun-seonsaeng riding the wind, Ami Jeseok, Yeorae Jeseok..."

(5) The Descent and the Appearance of the Altar

"In this house, the Chilseong shrine is set, the state-shaman (narat mansin) becomes a sacred practitioner (jungsang)/Wearing a long robe of fifty-two spans (swindae-ja), an eight-paneled gown (pal-jangsam), and high hat of three and a half inches (seok-chi bangokkal)/Dressed in a fine hempen robe (si-mosi jangsam)/When the Jeseok deities descend, a bridge of silk is laid, a fortress of white cotton is wrapped/Sitting upon the high-set table of offerings, savoring the thousand-course feast..."

(6) The Deities of Human Creation and the Offerings

“The bellflower from the high mountains belongs to the Sein-nim who took charge of the body/The radish and tofu belong to the Sein-nim who took charge of the head/The twisted mung bean sprouts belong to the Sein-nim who took charge of the intestines/The pumpkin from here and there belongs to the Sein-nim who took charge of the lungs/The ferns from the deep mountains belong to the Sein-nim who took charge of the hands and feet...”

(7) Blessings for the Client and Self-Referential Plea

“The sincere devotion (jeongseong) reaches and overflows within the Jade Capital (Okgyeong) and the heavens/Filling every corner with the family’s heart/The devotion, white cotton banners, is bound to the left and right, filling the space/The master is sixty-one years old, but grant him youth again/Give him the strength and vitality of a fifteen-year-old’s heart and body/Whatever business he does, let it prosper in a hundred ways and be great in a thousand...”

The synthesis of messages within this *manse-baji* text reveals a sophisticated mechanism of discursive healing. First, the ritual initiates an ontological anchoring by summoning canonical coordinates of time and space. By invoking the Eight Trigrams (*pal-gwae*), the rhythms of vital energy and good fortune (*Saenggi-bokdeok*), and the specific celestial timing (Items 1, 2, and 3), the *manse-baji* situates the ritual within a sanctified framework, distinct from the chaotic time and space where the patient’s crisis occurred. This process does not immediately resolve the crisis; rather, it re-locates the patient’s individual bafflement into a shared and ritualistic domain. By anchoring the performance in this predetermined cosmic order, the ritual establishes a predictable trajectory through which the patient’s random traffic accidents and restless nights can subsequently be re-interpreted and managed.

Furthermore, the chant facilitates a relational re-entanglement of the body through the explicit naming of physical ailments. In the *manse-baji*, specific internal organs—the head, heart, and digestive system—are placed under the direct jurisdiction of the deities (Items 4, 5, and 6). By declaring that the Seven Stars (*Chilseong*) and the Lord of the Earth (*Jisin*) are taking charge of these body parts, the ritual transforms the isolated biological body into a relational body exposed to and protected by non-human agencies. The driver’s chest tightness is no longer a private medical fact; it is exposed as a relational rupture to be mended by the spiritual collective, thereby effectively displacing the burden of the illness from the individual to the gods.

Finally, through the ethics of reciprocity, the patient’s devotion (*jeongseong*) is proclaimed to resonate within the celestial realm, granting moral legitimacy to the plea for recovery (Items 3 and 7). The declaration that the 61-year-old driver is restored with the vitality of a 15-year-old symbolizes more than physical cure; it represents the restoration of balance between human will and the patronal universe.

Anthropologist Vitebsky (2001) emphasizes that health in shamanism extends beyond biomedical well-being to encompass ecological and cosmological harmony.

“[Health] is not just physical health in the medical sense, or even mental health in the psychiatric sense. It includes adequate nutrition, smooth friendships, prosperity, successful business and successful combat. All of these are based on notions of environmental harmony, flow and balance, and on the generosity or restraint, affection or anger, motive and will of the spirits who animate that environment”. (Vitebsky 2001, p. 150)

As Vitebsky suggests, the *byeong-gut* operates on a relational epistemology where human life is inextricably linked to the surrounding environment and the sacred coordinates

of time and space. Through the ritual performance, the sanctity of the canonical message is established: that a healthy state, and indeed a state of salvation, is achieved only when one's life is in harmony with the cosmic order. Ultimately, the analysis of the *manse-baji* reveals that the *byeong-gut* maintains the formal structure of a *jaesu-gut* precisely because it is grounded in this invariant cosmology. It functions not merely as an instrumental cure for a specific ailment but as an ethical and cosmological teaching, conveying a shamanic worldview on how to live a truly healthy life—one that maintains a delicate balance between human will and the spiritual forces that animate the universe.

5. Conclusions: Healing as the Restoration of Relational Cosmology

As Baker (2008) insightfully argued, Korean spirituality is fundamentally characterized by an effort to overcome human suffering and moral deficiency by looking beyond the isolated individual toward a broader relational context. This study has expanded and substantiated Baker's discourse by providing a concrete empirical case: the structural and linguistic analysis of the *byeong-gut*.

As reviewed through the history of shamanism studies, the theme of healing has served as a catalyst for the re-emergence of shamanism in modern society. However, this focus carries the risk of positioning shamanic healing as a mere competitor to modern medical systems. While psychiatric and analytical psychological frameworks have allowed researchers to sidestep the question of physical efficacy, they have often inadvertently obscured the expressive dimension of ritual—the specific religious messages and cosmological knowledge encoded within the ceremony itself. By fixating on the functional aspect of curing, previous studies have overlooked why the *byeong-gut* (healing ritual) remains structurally almost identical to the *jaesu-gut*, incorporating numerous elements seemingly unrelated to the immediate ailment.

This article has argued that the *byeong-gut* is not a separate category of ritual but a variation on the foundational shamanic liturgy. Beyond the pragmatic goal of curing, it is a performance that communicates canonical messages encoding shamanism's unique epistemology and cosmology. Specifically, it demonstrates how that process unfolds through a synthesis of material and discursive mechanisms. On one hand, ritual implements and surrogates—such as the chicken or the shirt—function as an ontological technology that objectifies and displaces the locus of suffering from the isolated individual to an external agent. On the other hand, the analysis of the *manse-baji* reveals a linguistic device that fuses canonical and indexical messages, situating the individual within a web of reciprocal ethics. Through this dual operation, the individual's physical crisis is re-interpreted not as an isolated biological failure, but as a disruption within a relational universe. This is not a mere symbolic change, but a reassembling of the social and spiritual collective (Latour 2005), where the patient's life is re-woven into a meshwork of enduring relational lines (Ingold 2000).

The healing found in the *byeong-gut* is thus not a mystical secret process, but a conveyance of a specific knowledge system. It is achieved through the formal and invariant aspects of the ritual, which act as a perspective-shifting mechanism. This leads the participant to view their suffering no longer as a private burden, but as a meaningful element within a structured experience of the world. The case of Mr. Kim, who now consults the *mudang* Dani to discern the spiritual alignment of his daily life, exemplifies this transformation. His shift represents a move from an isolated ego to a subject who imbues his surrounding time and space with relational meaning.

Ultimately, the *byeong-gut* proves that in Korean spirituality, the resolution of suffering is achieved by re-mapping the individual onto a relational cosmos, thereby transforming the crisis of the self into a reaffirmation of a shared and sacred order. This transition

is made possible by the dual operation of shamanic cosmology: while the patronal universe restores the protective bonds of spiritual reciprocity, the optimal universe provides an intelligible framework of predestined harmony. By navigating these two cosmological dimensions, the *byeong-gut* transcends a purely functionalist framework of medical cure, establishing itself as a profound religious teaching on how to sustain a meaningful life within an inherently ordered and relationally interconnected universe.

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Notes

- ¹ Note on Romanization: Throughout this article, Korean terms and names are transliterated according to the Revised Romanization of Korean, promulgated by the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2000. For the sake of analytical consistency, names from earlier ethnographic works that utilized the McCune-Reischauer system (e.g., ‘Chŏn’ in Kendall 1985) have been updated to the current standard (e.g., ‘Jeon’).
- ² While the term displacement is frequently employed in psychoanalytic and sociological discourses to describe the shift in affect or conflict from one object to another, I use relational displacement specifically as a ritual mechanism of ontological reconfiguration. My conceptualization resonates with several theoretical precedents but departs from them in significant ways. For instance, Girard’s (1977) scapegoating mechanism involves the displacement of communal violence onto a surrogate victim to restore social order. In contrast, relational displacement in the *gut* focuses on the strategic relocation of individual suffering into a distributed cosmological network where agency is shared. Furthermore, while Lévi-Strauss’s (1963) “symbolic effectiveness” emphasizes the linguistic translation of pain into mythic structures, relational displacement highlights the spatial and ontological movement of suffering from the burdened interior of the moral self to the negotiated exterior of the optimal and patronal universes.
- ³ Portions of the ethnographic data analyzed in this section, specifically the case of Mr. Kim and Dani, were previously discussed in the author’s article published in Korean: D. Kim (2018), “Chibyeong-gut-e Daehan Jonggyoinryuhakjeok Yeongu: Musok Uire-ui Chiyuseong Jaego” (An Anthropological Study of Religion on *Chibyeong-gut*: Reconsidering the Healing Nature of Shamanic Rituals). This manuscript builds upon that preliminary research by providing a substantially new theoretical framework—specifically relational displacement and new materialism—and an expanded analysis for an international academic audience. Furthermore, all personal names mentioned in this study, including Mr. Kim and Dani, are pseudonyms used to protect the privacy and anonymity of the research participants.
- ⁴ Dani (pseudonym) is a prominent Korean shaman based in the Seoul metropolitan area, specializing in the Hwanghae-do ritual tradition. At the time of the ritual in 2018, she was 51 years old and already a seasoned practitioner with 45 years of experience. Having been initiated into shamanism in her early childhood, she is recognized for her mastery of the complex and traditional liturgical structures of the Hwanghae-do style. Her extensive career and strict adherence to formal ritual sequences make her an ideal subject for analyzing the invariant qualities of the canonical message.
- ⁵ For a more comprehensive historical and ethnographic analysis of the dynamic tension and negotiation between these two cosmological models—the patronal universe and the optimal universe—see D. Kim (2025). In that study, the author examines the historical trajectories through which these metaphors have competed and converged, as well as the specific ways contemporary Korean shamans strategically employ both frameworks to address the complex existential crises of modern practitioners.
- ⁶ The following text of the *manse-baji* is originally performed as a single and continuous oral chant. For the purpose of structural analysis, I have divided the text into seven numerical segments based on their thematic content. These divisions and the corresponding numbers are not present in the original performance.

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