

Folklore as a Reflection of a Society: Black Pete and Cheoyong

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Abstract

Folklore is not completely imaginary, in that it originated from facts in history, and history cannot be completely invariant in that it is often tailored to serve a certain group or nation. In such a sense folklore and history are closely related each other and both serve to engender national identity. It is interesting to note that such semi-invented folklore from historical facts mirrors the contemporary multi-ethnic society; at the same time, it mirrors how the majority deals with the minority in the nation. This paper attempts to investigate two figures from folklore, respectively: Black Pete in the Netherlands, and Cheoyong in South Korea, to investigate how the minorities are represented in the national discourse. This paper explores whether the difference between the two narratives can be explained by the process of national identification in the two countries, and posits that the narratives of the majority groups of both commit epistemological violence to the minority by either including them in the master discourse yet reifying them as figments of colonialism, or dismissing the possibility of the minority to be a part of history so as to marginalize its existence and strengthen ideas of homogeneity. This paper also notes how folklore changes with the society, as it is reflective of the society.

Keywords: Black Pete, Cheoyong, national identity, folklore, ethnic homogeneity, Netherlands, Korea

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Introduction

It is often said that if one knows their history, then one will know one's identity. It is not overstated that due to this reason, history is regarded as invariant and is considered to be a barometer of how one perceives oneself. This may be precisely the reason why history is constituted in such a way to bind people with similar thought together. In other words, history can hardly be invariant in the sense that the intention behind it is to engender a group that imagines the same story. It is as E.H. Carr (1964) has suggested, that history is what the historian has cooked with the facts from history to make it appealing to him (Carr, 1964, p. 9). This perspective implies that the events in history are told with the teller's intention, and it is decorated in a way that satisfies the audience. Keith Jenkins (1991) also regarded history as a job of historian but he further assumed that the work is after all related to power relations, in that those who have the knowledge would be in the lead of the work. To him history is a contested discourse, an embattled terrain wherein peoples, classes, and groups autobiographically construct interpretations of the past, literally to please themselves. As he defines history in his book *Rethinking History* that history is "a shifting, problematic discourse, ostensibly about an aspect of the world, the past, that is produced by a group of present-minded workers" (Jenkins, 1991, p. 31). The fact that the work is from the past is interesting to note, and that the past has been interpreted to please the present should also be noted. Likewise, a nation's tradition also is involved in its history, and folklore contributes the foundation of the tradition, or vice versa. These traditions and folklore are often embedded with historical facts, and sometimes it brings the old practices of the past into present practices. In this sense, Eric Hobsbawm (1983) has stated that traditions are invented; furthermore, he writes "inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 4). In other words, such traditions are invented on the basis of history to form or to present social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, which in a broader sense can symbolize the nation (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 9). However, the notion of 'one's belonging to a community based on the homogeneity is what Stuart Hall defined 'an old identity'. In globalized societies, the definition of 'nation' has been harder to clearly enunciate, as a nation does not necessarily mean a group of people whose skin color is the same. What is interesting is how the invented tradition from the sources in history has been reinforced and its narrative transformed to fit their national identity making. In other words, as there exist a number of minorities with different histories and cultures, it is often seen that traditions and folklore are tailored to necessarily shape the thinking of the nation. Then the choice of the minorities should be either to accept the thoughts, or to raise a question to the degree to which they can afford to do so. Under such a hegemony, according to Hall, it is 'a war of position' in Gramscian terms, which means to find a ground to be positioned in order to speak (Hall, 1991, p. 51). He argues, therefore, that identity is always in the process of forming itself. (Hall, 1991, p. 47). And if identity is always changing, it means that the holder of the identity also keeps changing; in this sense, the society, being the holder, is also continuously changing.

Given the fact that traditions can be invented based on the facts from the past, it is interesting to study the tradition to observe social change, and how tradition asks the members of the society to have a certain 'national' or 'group' identity within a broader community of 'groups' or 'nations'. In other words, the traditions are

engendered to solidify the sense of belonging to the group, and they imply the hierarchy among the different groups of the nation because in most of the cases traditions are made by the majority, and if the concept of the minority is included, then it is a question of how the minority group is represented. Therefore, it is interesting to see how the society is formed by investigating these traditions.

It is with this reason that the traditions and folklore on the basis of history are, what this paper will investigate as a reflection of a society. Folklore can be seen as white lies; in a sense that the tradition and folklore makers create such an illusion to strengthen the sense of collectivity, and the minorities in the collective group can also identify themselves in the imagined community, as Anderson (1991) has argued. However, folklore and tradition are not entirely lies due to its origin from history. The constituents of the folklore and tradition are real, even though they have been selectively chosen. Then the question remains: how folklore contributes to the tradition, and how they selectively endanger the identity that fits the majority. This paper will look into two different distinctive characters from two folklores: Black Pete from the Netherlands, and Cheoyong from the Cheoyong Narration in South Korea. These two pieces of folklore have one characteristic in common in that they are transmitted to the next generation through a somewhat institutionalized means of education: textbooks or collective festivals. What this paper would like to tease out is how the traditional folklore can be seen from the perspectives of the minorities in both countries, because the two figures are considered or represented as minorities, and what the folklore actually presents to us.

Black Pete

The issue of identification is heatedly debated in the Netherlands on their celebration of Saint Nicolas known as Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas) day in a sense that it is a question of 'which identity' one holds and where one would position politically. As Hall has stated, a process of identification is always constructed through ambivalence, and so the Dutch tradition of St. Nicholas can be ambiguous in definition in that it seems like citizens of the Netherlands position themselves on a fence to see which part rightly refers to their identity: pro or con to the concept of Black Pete. It is also interesting to see how the folklore was created and was formed throughout time. To briefly introduce, it is believed that St. Nicolas comes to the Netherlands by a steamboat from Madrid, Spain. What makes it unique and controversial is that he accompanies helpers whose name is Zwarte Piet, which means 'Black Pete'. Black Pete is an important figure in the Dutch Christmas tradition, and has a significant role to give out presents to good children and punish those who behaved badly in the previous year. The Black Pete character is part of the annual feast of St. Nicholas, usually celebrated on the evening of 5 December (Sinterklaasavond, that is, St. Nicholas' Eve) in the Netherlands. The characters of Black Pete appear only in the weeks before Saint Nicholas's feast, first when the saint is welcomed with a parade as he arrives in the country. The tasks of the Black Pete nowadays are mostly to please children, and to scatter traditional candies for those who come to meet the saint as he visits stores, schools, and other places. Alison Blakely (1993) pointed out that the tradition did not change for so many years and is still celebrated, yet it is interesting to note that the roles of the characters have changed throughout the times. John Helsloot (2013) wrote that the role of Saint Nicholas's at first was for him to give presents to the good children and punish the bad. Even after the introduction of Black Peter in

1850, it was St Nicholas himself that castigated the naughty children. Helsloot stated that the role of the bad guy befell on Black Pete, with the description of him as gruesome, frightening. Allison also explained that the figures of Black Pete symbolize the devil, with traces of belief in paganism and Christianity (Allison, 1993, p.45). But since the 1960s the pairing of opposites has been attenuated to the point that Black Pete became the center of the tradition with much affection because of his wit, friendliness and fun. (Helsloot, 2013, p. 125)

What can be noted from these changes of characterization of Black Pete is that the figure of Black Pete represents the typical perception of the Other in the host society in that it is scary, slightly stupid, and lacks the ability to speak properly. Interestingly, it would not be a coincidence that the time, when the descriptions of Black Pete got toned down, and the role increased to the degree that these unique yet friendly figures became the center of the festival, is when the voices of self-criticism and of African-descent people got louder. This can be analyzed as the tradition has been interacting with social opinions, thus inventing and changing details continuously. Then how has this collective participation in the tradition been an issue of racism? According to Helsloot (2013), it was when a large number of people from Suriname, a former Dutch colony, moved to the Netherlands to reside in the 1980s, and some progressive white people who objected to the racial stereotyping manifest in the 1960s. Through these times, Black Pete seems to have evolved, and this could be partially the reason that the journal *Economists* (2013) could analyze in the article *Is Zwarte Piet Racism?* that "with his fantastical role and antique costume, Zwarte Piet seems disconnected from modern racial stereotypes. He made it through the Netherlands' politically correct 1990s without raising many eyebrows." However, according to the same source, it recently has become even more of an issue than before when a Curaçao-born Dutch performance artist, Quinsy Gario began to protest by wearing a T-shirt reading "Zwarte Piet is racism" and was arrested. Gario explains how this tradition still represents the typical perception toward black people. According to the *Economist* article, he started to protest because his mother was insulted by a person at work saying to her: "we were wondering where our Zwart Piet was and there you are." This shows the thought that is outdated, and is still discriminating the Other as it easily undermines the Other to be a figure in the children's festival. It is in a country where other ethnicities have immigrated for decades, and lived with the majority. It is precisely in this sense that Gario asks for the attention: "We began this project because we [sensed] a want of historical knowledge about the figure of Zwarte Piet. It aimed at starting a 'sane dialogue, based on facts.' We don't say: 'stop celebrating Sinterklaas.' We say: 'study the origin of the phenomenon of Zwarte Piet and ask yourself the question if that is still acceptable in today's world'" (*Is Zwarte Piet Racism*, 2013). With this in mind, Allison has argued that the figures of Black Pete, which is "born evil, elevated to innocence over the centuries," have again faced the crisis of their "innocence" (Allison, 1993, p. 49).

As it can be seen in the argument that the tradition of Black Pete in history may imply how the view toward the black immigrants changed, yet Gario still asks that it be reconsidered and redirected to join the other members of society. There are however some attempts to sooth the anger, which consequently caused other issues as well: one article written by Arnon Grunberg in the *New York Times* (2013) stated that one of the movements as an alternative appeared in an attempt to keep the tradition without the controversial issue of racism, which is to paint Pete to be rainbow colored. It,

however, resulted in an outcry of adults, and had to be stopped since some deadly threats have been made to those in favor of Black Pete to be colored otherwise. (Grunberg, 2013)

What is interesting in this debate is whether or not it is racism. However, if it is viewed from the discussion on national identity construction, it can also be considered impressive that the representation of the minority group in the folklore is quite prominent. In other words, when the tradition was invented and reinvented, the Other was considered as a participant in the society, although it is a point of criticism due to the generalization and ridiculization of the figures. Still it has evolved throughout history and it is actively involved in the "master concept" (Hall, 1991, p. 46) of the national identity. Yet what is regrettable to see then is the fact that the voices of the alternative cannot be heard by the majority. The gesture of the majority toward the issue can seem condescending in that the acceptance of being difference means dual to the major group. In other words, this core sense of national identity lets the Other to be a part of the group because it can admit its difference, yet forces the Other to leave because the group cannot accept any other alternatives than what the majority set as a standard. Grunberg in the *New York Times* (2013) well stated that "Yet the general tenor among the Dutch public was that "they" should keep their mitts off "our tradition," an opinion you can hear in any number of variations on any street corner. By "them" people mean the United Nations and "unnatural" Dutch citizens, by both birth and naturalization, who want to put an end to this admittedly dubious tradition."

Cheoyong Narration

The case of the Netherlands is in the narrative of ambivalence of the national identity. It is a question of where one positions oneself in, to be a team of 'us' or an outsider of 'us'. This 'we and they' narrative seems clearer in the case of Korea, since Korean society has been known for its emphasis on homogeneity as it is often called *Hanminjok* meaning 'one nation'. It is not surprising that the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urged in a statement in 2007: "that the emphasis placed on the ethnic homogeneity of Korea might represent an obstacle to the promotion of understanding, tolerance and friendship among the different ethnic and national groups living on its territory" (as cited from the article on *Joongangdaily* by Lee, 2007). As the same source revealed, it is interesting that the UN committee urged the Korean society to take immediate actions on some fields such as teaching, education, culture and information to recognize the multi-ethnic character. It cannot be enough to emphasize that through education the national identity is strengthened, and therefore it should be revisited to see whether or not the emphasis is rightly put. For example, Park (2007), as cited by Hong (2010), examined elementary social studies and civic textbooks and argued that they tended to reproduce the myth that Korea is a land of homogenous people sharing the same culture and history. Many textbook descriptions, according to Park, were based on ethnocentrism and often provided biased and distorted images of other peoples and cultures (Hong, 2010, p. 391). This suggests that the concern of the UN committee has not been a mere interference of domestic governance.

It is interesting that Korean society has focused on homogeneity so long. Has the world ever been not a globalized community? Pheng Cheah (1998) has argued that cosmopolitanism is not a new concept which rises with the advent of globalization,

which means that the world has been globalized for a long time. Stuart Hall (2000) also pointed out that multi-cultural societies are not new, and even long before the European expansion, which made the movement more intensive, the world was ethnically or culturally 'mixed' (Hall, 2000, p. 212). It is a phenomenon that has been around for centuries. That is to say, a society that claims to be homogeneous is a community with its identity based on an imagination; it is, as Anderson (1991) stated, an imagined community that attempts to winnow out the traces of the minority from the majority group. One of the examples that this paper brings is the traditional folklore; at the same time, the traditional song and dance of Korea: the Cheoyong Narration. It is about a man called Cheoyong, who supposedly was one of the seven sons of the Dragon King. Cheoyong followed King Hungang to the then capital of the Shilla dynasty, Gyeongju, after the King built a temple for the Dragon King at a port area called Gaeunpo. The King bestowed a position and a wife to Cheoyong as an extension of gratitude. His wife was very pretty, which tempted the goddess of smallpox to trick his wife to spend a night with him. When Cheoyong came home, he found four legs under the bedding. He grieved and expressed his sadness by singing and dancing. The goddess of smallpox got greatly touched by Cheoyong's tolerance over the affair and promised Cheoyong that he would never appear again if Cheoyong's picture is on the door of a house. For this reason, the story has been transformed into folklore that is sung and danced, to eradicate misfortune. However, what is interesting is that there are scholars who doubt whether or not, among many other theories¹, Cheoyong is indeed a Korean, as the folklore implies between the lines. This question is raised due to the historical fact that Cheoyong might be a Muslim merchant who traversed through China to Korea (Lee 1969; Jung 2005, Lee 2012). In Yong Su Choi's analysis (1993) of the studies on the Cheoyong Narration, an interesting contrast appears between different views. He described Yong Beom Lee's study (1969) on Cheoyong as that of "interpretation focused on the Chronicles of the Three States and the scholars description in the late period of Goryo, which contributes to the view of Cheoyong as an Islamic merchant who was active throughout the area from Guangzhou to Yangzhou," and in response to Lee's argument, Choi also wrote Gi Baek Lee's claim (1972) stating "it seems to be an over-interpretation to relate an Arab merchant's financial prowess to state affairs." (Choi, 1993, pp.13, 15) It is a clear contrast where a sense of nationalism can be hinted. Furthermore, it is all the more interesting in the line with the movement in the post-independence period to re-establish the national identity. Kon Taek Lim (2012) stated that the traditional three-verse Korean poem, *Sijoh* had been faded after the colonization mainly due to its relatedness to the Joseon dynasty which was followed by the hardship and shame under Imperial Japan. To people's mind, *Sijoh* was rather outdated and reminded of the dynasty that collapsed; in consequence, the nation was lost. To raise the nation's spirit after the dreadful period, Lim wrote, the Korean folk songs from the Silla dynasty to early Goryo dynasty, *Hyangga* and *Hwarang* spirit, which is the spirit of chivalry of Silla, replaced *Sijoh*, which struggled to find its fame back. According to Lim, the Korean folk songs, *Hyangga* became the 'inevitable

¹ Yong Su Choi (1993) analyzed papers on the study of the Cheoyong Narration, and the papers published vary from 1918 to 1992. He listed the different views on the Cheoyong's identity as a fisher, Buddhist, Hwarang (a Silla knight), hero, shaman, son of a powerful local clan, Islam merchant, person from a tribe in the border of Yongseong country, immigrant from the south, God of solar eclipse, sea and house guardian deity, symbol of summer, symbolic figure of the nation, ideological product, and consciousness etc. It is interesting to note that there are three possibilities that could suggest Cheoyong to be a foreigner, and the rest seems fairly related to the mystical figure.

peoplehood' replacing *Sijoh* after going through the colonization and the Korean war (Lim, 2012, p. 238).

Combining these interesting findings from two studies of Choi and Lim, it can be assumed that the trend to find the traditional Koreaness from the Silla dynasty could have raised the importance of *Hyangga*, such as the Cheoyong Narration. Therefore the tradition of *Hyangga* has been revisited and reinvented to form a different identity from the colonial period, and to reinforce the nationhood. It may also carefully be suggested that it is because of this reason that the narrative of the identity of Cheoyong could be no more than a discussion, and rather to be left as a myth which leaves little space for the minority in Korea to relate themselves in the discourse of national identity. It should be a point to doubt whether the discussion on the identity of Cheoyong should never be clearly sorted out due to the lack of historical facts, or the lack of willingness to acknowledge the history of 'mixed blood'.

Implications

These two cases of traditional folklore show how a tradition can be embedded with historical facts. The folklore involves the participants who are the narrators and listeners, and these draw a voluntary or tacit participation in the discourse. With the example of Dutch folklore, it shows how a Gramscian hegemony is in operation in that the existence of the big community makes it possible for the members of the society to mingle inside, what Hall called a "concerted agreement". Borrowing from Stuart Hall's example of a British tea cup, the case of the Dutch can be described similar in that of the cup which allows its ingredients to be a part of the tea as long as it agrees to be the tea, as in Dutch. While the differences are acceptable, the tea cannot be other than being Dutch, and the ingredients should agree on that. However, the second example with the Korean folklore, the difference is hardly seen because, figuratively speaking, if the possible pigment is detected through the screening lenses it seems to dilute it to be the like, on the process of re-establishing the nation. Simply put, if one is different in the tea cup, the choice is to stay outside of the tea cup to be labeled an exotic dessert, or to be in the cup as other Koreans. Therefore, the two different folklore ask their members of society where 'they' are standing, and show how 'we' perceive 'you'.

The differences lie on the discourses of each case. In the Dutch case, the discourse was inclusive in that the minority group, politically black as Hall defines, is in the process of identity formation and was "in the tea cup". To simply put, the minority group was included in the narrative of the national identity, which can be argued to be positive and negative at the same time, in that the representation of the minority was distorted from the view of the majority. While the minority was included in the discourse in the Dutch case, the possibility of the existing minority group in the Korean case is marginalized as much as possible, and often excluded in the narrative of the national identity despite the fact that historically it has seldom been isolated from the invasion or interaction with other countries. It is that 'we' know who 'we' are, from the history of the Other in the Dutch case, and 'we' should keep 'ourselves' in the history from the Other's invasion in the Korean case.

Even until now, the issues related to this traditional folklore are ongoing. Most prominently, the recent article on *Aljazeera America* revealed that the Dutch case is

significant because of the recent ruling of the Amsterdam court stating that Black Pete indeed is offensive to black people in the Netherlands, due to its stereotyped representation (De Bode, 2014). Now what this could mean is that from this year's celebration, Black Pete may have to be some other Pete, which would not represent any of the minority groups. There have been some voices of criticism both from inside and outside of the Netherlands that if the color of the Pete is what causes the problem then they should change it to green or purple etc, but that was not practiced in the Netherlands, whereas it was by some Dutch expats in the U.S. However, because of the ruling in Amsterdam, some change will be made in the traditional celebration. What could this mean to the folklore figure of South Korea, Cheoyong? With the recent study of scholar Heesu Lee (2012) on the interpretation of a Persian epic poem, *Kushnameh*, the identity of Cheoyong could be uncovered. The epic poem describes a story of the Persian prince Abtin, who is said to have moved to Silla and got married to a princess, which accords with the story of Cheoyong. Then, it is a question of whether the majority could think of the minority as a part of a culture or group, without making the minority into a complete Korean. That is to say, the question of having other ethnicities in the society do not necessarily harm the nation, and thinking Cheoyong's possible identity as an Arab without a question that goes: "how dare one can think of such thing to our ancestor?"

Changing of the tradition is a powerful tool of analysis because history and tradition are reflective of deep social attitude, and in this case we can study the attitude toward the minorities. Given the fact that tradition is something that can be invented from history, if history is revisited, then the nature of the tradition can also be changed, which is yet another form of reflection of the society, which keeps changing. The fact that both societies are changing, it shows the changes in the perspectives toward the minorities, the changes that are occurring in the Netherlands can also occur in South Korea. Koreans will reevaluate Cheoyong as Dutch are reevaluating Black Pete, which is possible with the change of the perspective toward the minorities.

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