SNUAC Asia Square Brown Bag Seminar Series, Autumn 2026

The Beauty of Disguise: Reimagining Community through Korean Mask Dance

Vani Tendenan

Korean mask dance (talchum) offers a particularly significant example of how performance can become a medium through which religious practices, social contradictions, and collective identities are expressed and negotiated. This article addresses this question through the conceptual framework of The Beauty of Disguise, which approaches disguise not simply as an act of concealment but as an aesthetic and performative practice that creates possibilities for communal reflection and reimagining. Drawing primarily on Victor Turner's theory of ritual, particularly the interconnected concepts of separation, liminality, communitas, and reaggregation, the article examines how mask dance may generate a transitional space in which established social identities and relationships become open to questioning. Turner's framework provides a way to understand performance as a process through which individuals symbolically move away from their ordinary social positions, encounter alternative forms of interaction within a liminal condition, and subsequently return to social life with the possibility of reinterpreting their communal relationships. Within this framework, communitas is understood as a potential experience of shared belonging that may emerge when established social distinctions are temporarily unsettled, rather than an inevitable outcome of collective performance.

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative interpretive approach informed by historical and cultural contextualization and critical performance analysis. It examines the symbolic significance of masks, the expressive capacities of bodily movements, the use of humor and satire, and the interaction between performers and audiences in Korean mask dance. Particular attention is given to how masked characters embody social contradictions, expose vulnerabilities within established hierarchies, and create opportunities for audiences to reconsider the norms and relationships that shape their communal lives. Rather than treating the body as merely an instrument for communicating predetermined cultural meanings, the analysis considers embodied performance as a process through which social

meanings are produced, experienced, and negotiated. It also considers the relationship between liminal experience and reaggregation, asking whether the possibilities generated within performance can inform renewed understandings of community beyond the theatrical encounter itself. The article argues that the significance of talchum extends beyond its function as a representation of cultural identity or a vehicle for social criticism. Its deeper aesthetic and social potential lies in the capacity of disguise to interrupt the apparent stability of everyday identities, make social contradictions collectively perceptible, and open a space in which alternative forms of communal relationships can be imagined.

Vani Tendenan is an Indonesian theologian specializing in systematic theology and theology of culture. She received her Ph.D. from Yonsei University, where her doctoral research examined funeral dance through the lenses of aesthetics, ritual, and Christology. Her broader research interests include ritual and performance, the feministology, and cultural studies. She has published in international peer-reviewed journals and currently serves in Indonesian migrant ministry while continuing interdisciplinary research on religion, culture, embodiment, and social justice.

Date & Time: Tuesday, 10th November, 12:00-13:00

Place: SNUAC Room 304 (3rd Floor)