

9-2013

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Recommended Citation

Oh, J. S. (2013). Delivering Peace out of the Broken Womb: A Postcolonial Interreligious Perspective. *Current Dialogue*, 55(25), 29. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/phil_facpub/7

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Delivering Peace Out of the Broken Womb: A Postcolonial Interreligious Perspective

Jea Sophia Oh

When we talk about interreligious dialogue, we may think of some constructive activities between different religious traditions such as a dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, Confucianism and Christianity, Daoism and Christianity, etc. In this paper, having a dialogue between two major religious traditions in terms of a specific theme is not my concern. Rather, I focus on the Jeju people's spirituality, which is a collection of folk beliefs and myths and I compare that to neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism in the 21st century which is based upon a power structure of capitalism, globalization and battling addiction. However, the theme of this paper is not simply dichotomizing peace and war or *salim* (enlivening) and *jugim* (violence) as a parallel structure. Beyond a comparison of *salim* and *jugim*, I would like to find a postcolonial vision of interreligious dialogue through observing the long struggling of the Gangjeong village of Jeju in South Korea against the construction of the naval base. First, we have to learn about the mythology of Jeju, especially its creation story, to see the meaning of the Gurumbi Rock in Gangjeong village of Jeju. Second, we have to ask what it means to build the naval base in Jeju, why it is colonialism and why we need to decolonize "nature as a whole", including humans from human imperialism. Third, we need to find how we make peace and dialogues in the midst of the imperialism and violence against our ecosystem.

She Who Creates (Creating: *salim*)

Jeju Island in Korea is one of the most beautiful volcanic islands in the world. The people of Jeju Island believe that Jeju was created by the Goddess Sulmoondae. According to the mythology of Jeju, Jeju is a beautiful handmade masterpiece of Sulmoondae, the Giant Creator. She

divided the earth from the heavens by stretching her legs so that the earth became a separate place. She made the beautiful Mt. Halla and Sungsan Sunrise Peak by moving and changing the positions of sands and rocks like an artist designs and carves images. Rivers and valleys were made by her urination. She was irritated since a herd of deer came into her vagina because they thought it was a cave. So she ejaculated tremendous amounts of water that eroded mountains and made rivers and the ocean. She is a Giant Grandmother. Her pillow is Mt. Halla and her seat is the Gurumbi Rock in Gangjeong. After she created Jeju, she became a mother of five hundred children, feeding and raising them. What she did was the same as what typical mothers do at home. When she washed laundry, she stepped one foot on the Gwantal Island and the other foot on the Jigui Island and covered the whole part of Jeju Island with her skirt as if she embraced the people of Jeju and clarified the entire Jeju Island. She sacrificed her body while she was cooking a huge pot of porridge for her children. Her hungry children were fed without knowing that her body became a part of the porridge. Her body was melted in her children as *bab* (food) for life.

Sulmoondae, the Creator Goddess, is far different from the traditional image of the Christian God, so-called heavenly Father. She is a representative image of typical mothers of Jeju who are diligent, independent, brave, objective, eco-centred, active, hardworking, and self-giving mothers. What she does is actually what typical mothers of Jeju do: delivering children, taking care of children, cleaning, washing, cooking, all the activities which make things alive. In the traditional sense, we call these home activities *salim*. *Salim* refers to women's tasks such as cooking, cleaning and washing, raising children,

and managing household affairs. Although *salim* has been gendered and degraded as exclusively women's tasks in Korea, *salim* also means making things alive, restoring, and enlivening, including all diverse activities that make things alive and keep things living. Sulmoondae embraces both the narrow and broad meanings of *salim* in her activities. Sulmoondae became the food of her children. Her children mourned their mother by standing in all different places of Jeju and becoming the five hundred guardian rocks in Jeju. Jeju is the sacred body of Sulmoondae, the incarnation of her *kenosis*, self-giving love. Therefore, Jeju is the body of Sulmoondae Halmang (the Eternal Grandmother), among which the Gurumbi Rock in Gangejong is like the womb of Sulmoondae. The Gurumbi Rock is one of the most beautiful natural objects in Jeju. In the centre of Gurumbi Rock, there is a natural fountain, Halmang-Mool (the Eternal Grandmother's water, the Sacred Living Water). The natural spring of Gurumbi is like her Sacred Vagina, the place to give birth that never dries. According to the creation mythology, the ocean and the streams of Jeju were made of Sulmoondae's urine. By her ejaculation, oceans and streams flow and grow for feeding the entire living beings in Jeju Island abundantly. The people of Gangjeong have used Halmang-Mool (the Sacred Water) for rituals (weddings and funerals) and healing. It is not just water, but the Sacred Water for healing and enlivening. For the Jeju people, Sulmoondae is the Living Creator who protects and enlivens the Jeju people. She is the Mother of Jeju mothers, the Grandmother of the Jeju people. She is the Salimist Goddess. The Korean eco-feminist theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung writes, "Salimist is a woman warrior who protects and enlivens the earth. She is a goddess within herself who loves and respects herself."¹

Hysterectomy of the Creator Goddess (Colonizing: *jugim*)

According to a *New York Times* article dated 18 August 2011:

In January [2011], the South Korean Navy began construction on a USD 970 million base in Gangjeong town, Jeju. Once completed in 2014, it will be home to 20 warships, including submarines, that the navy says will protect shipping lanes for South Korea's export-driven economy, which is dependent on imported oil. It will also enable South Korea to respond quickly to a brewing territorial dispute with China over Socotra Rock, a submerged reef south of Jeju that the Koreans call leodo. Both sides believe it is surrounded by oil and mineral deposits.²

Villagers from Gangjeong have been protesting against the construction of a naval base on Jeju Island for several years. As the military project would impact the ecosystem of a UNESCO's World Heritage sites, 94% of Jeju's residents have voted against the base in a referendum. Nevertheless, the South Korean government has insisted on carrying out the project. The majority of the Ganjeong villagers and peace activists from all over the nation and from overseas have protested against the naval base for over five years. On 7 March 2012, the South Korean Navy, together with the construction company Samsung Corporation, started blasting out the Gurumbi Rock foundations in the coastline. By the next day, hundreds of activists had arrived on the island to stop the navy from blowing up the coastline further for the construction of the docks. Many have been arrested.³ Now, people cannot even enter into the Gurumbi Rock which has been invaded by dynamite (more than 10 tons) many times (more than 100 times). The Sacred Body of Sulmoondae is destroyed by many dynamite explosions. It is a hysterectomy of the Creator Goddess, raping her Vagina and tearing her Womb up from her Sacred Body.

The Creator of Jeju, Sulmoondae, is the Salimist Goddess who enlivens nature, including humans. She is the God of Life for the Jeju people. Building the naval base in Gangjeong town in Jeju is totally against the Sulmoondae Goddess' creation purpose. The antonym of the

word *salim* is *jugim* (intentional killing). *Jugim* refers to all destructive activities, such as killing, marginalization, oppression, exploitation, coercion, colonization, contamination of the environment, destruction of the ecosystem, etc. *Jugim* is not natural but exists contrary to nature and the unnatural activities of life which engage in violence.

This building of the naval base is not only the *jugim* of the people, the land, and the whole ecosystem in Jeju, but is also the neo-colonization of Korea by the American Empire. "Fight to the death against the American imperialists' anti-China naval base!" says one banner, according to the New York Times. "Many villagers and anti-base activists from the Korean mainland suspect that the naval base will serve less as a shield against South Korea's prime enemy, North Korea, than as an outpost for the United States Navy to project its power against China."⁴ The naval base is likely to satisfy U.S. military interests in the Pacific Ocean in order to restrain China's rapidly growing economic and military power. Korea has been a bulwark against Chinese expansion since the end of World War II. When it is built, Jeju will operate as the base camp of the U.S. military.

The United States already has 219 bases on foreign soil in the Asia-Pacific; by comparison, China has none. The Jeju base would augment the Aegis-equipped systems in South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam and the U.S. colony of Guam. The Pentagon has also positioned Patriot PAC-3 missile defence systems in Taiwan, Japan and in South Korea, which hosts more than 100 U.S. facilities. The rationale behind this "empire of bases" was once the "containment" of communism. Obama's Pacific pivot is a turbo-charged update: not to contain communism but to contain China—economically, politically, and militarily. China has responded by accelerating its production of armaments, including a new aircraft carrier, while courting its own regional allies. As these two global behemoths shape a new geostrategic rivalry and arms race,

tensions are dangerously escalating, and smaller nations and peoples are pressured to choose sides.⁵

This is the same situation as the Korean proverb, "When the whales battle, the shrimps get crushed." An American Film Director, Oliver Stone, visited Gangjeong and said that the naval base is part of the "Asia pivot" being constructed by the United States and that Jeju was going to be "on the frontline" of any future conflict.⁶ This threatens the lives of Korean civilians instead of contributing to peace in the Pacific.

Edward W. Said, a founding figure of postcolonial studies, defines the term "imperialism" as the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; "colonialism" is almost always a consequence of imperialism.⁷ Even though, in our time, direct colonialism has largely ceased, the United States has neo-colonized South Korea. This is one of the apparent cases in which the American Empire exercises its colonial power over Korea by controlling and ruling South Korea from their own "military mentality" in the name of peace. The American Empire has shaped the flow of history far from the borders of the United States, just as empire shaped history within them. George W. Bush stated in his 2002 State of the Union Address: "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and pursuits of peace."⁸ Catherine Keller, a leading constructive theologian, says that this is a straightforward announcement of the *Pax Americana*, and by an implication widely noted, to building an empire.⁹ It threatens peace on Jeju Island since the naval base can create higher tension in North East Asian region.

A world-renowned eco-activist, Vandana Shiva, considers "eco-apartheid" as war: "Not only is corporate power converging with state power for the great resource grab, corporate-state power is emerging as militarized power to undemocratically

impose an unsustainable and unjust agenda on the earth and its people. That is how the war against the earth becomes a war against people, against democracy and against freedom.”¹⁰ Building a naval base in Gangjeong can be an example of “human imperialism” against the ecosystem. Building the naval base has already been destroying Gangjeong’s environment and has severely interrupted the ecological life. Eventually, it will change and damage the whole ecosystem of Jeju Island. Even though the Korean government – unsympathetic to non-human nature rather than just humanity – has undertaken the naval base project, it still can be viewed as a postcolonial issue. In this case, the state exercises its sovereign power to dominate the nonhuman nature, which has been greatly devastated. Eventually, humans will be affected as well. Many ecological movement groups and ecologically-minded individuals from Korea and from overseas resist this eco-destructive project, which will eventually break the rhythm of the ecosystem and destroy multiple life forms. This can be considered an example of humanity’s colonization of nonhuman nature. It is not *salim* but *jugim*.

Out of the Broken Womb (Decolonizing: *salim* dialogue)

The government authorities are using illegal force and violence to repress the anti-naval base protesters. The anti-naval base protesters march together in various ways on numerous occasions. Not only the Gangjeong villagers, but also diverse people from the Korea mainland and from all over the world participate in the Gangjeong peacemaking movements. Peacemaking activism creates solidarity beyond religious and spiritual boundaries. People who want peace in Gangjeong gather together and protest against the naval base. There is no boundary of age, gender, class, nation, culture, ethnicity, and religion. Buddhists, Christians, indigenous religious believers, artists, musicians, theologians, filmmakers, farmers, divers, etc. all resist together against the militarism in Gangjeong. Facebook networking is also very active

under the banner of “Save Jeju Island, the Town of Life and Peace, Gangjeong!” The villagers invite anyone who is committed to peace to join this peacemaking movement.

This is amazing, that as much as the state power violently suppresses the Gangjeong peacemaking movement, the solidarity for a peace march in Gangjeong becomes more solid and powerful. In the process of anti-naval base protests, people from all different places, religions, cultures, classes, etc. get together for peacemaking. This is a place of *salim* dialogue. From a postcolonial perspective, I would call this a “third space of hybridity.” According to Homi K. Bhabha, one of the most important figures in postcolonial studies, hybridity is a sign of the presence and engagement of colonial power. “The effect of colonial power is seen to be production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the colonial power produces a creative place of solidarity of the colonized. Bhabha adopts the concept of hybridity for the subversion of authority in colonial discourse and resistance against the dominant imperialist power of the colonizer. To Bhabha, hybridity is defined as “a problematic of colonial representation” that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other denied knowledge enters upon the dominant discourse and estranges the basis of its authority.¹² Hybridity deconstructs the binary logic and melts away the difference between “self” and “other”. As such, hybridity seeks a “third space”¹³ beyond the polarizations and deadlocks of identity politics.

This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.¹⁴

For Bhabha, the third space is a hybrid place of newness for both the colonizer and the colonized. It is that place which has no primordial unity or fixity, and therefore, is a place where one creates a newness, hybridity:

*The Third Space constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.*¹⁵

Under the state power and U.S. militarism, Ganyeong has created a third space of solidarity which is transcultural, transnational, multireligious, interdisciplinary, etc. for decolonizing. Peacemaking organizations from Korea and from overseas gather together under the banner of the Creator Goddess Sulmoondae who embraces and clarifies the entire Jeju Island. Peacemaking involves the work of decolonizing movements and entering into *salim* dialogues – work that is only done through the power of life, as our prayer of the Busan Assembly states: “God of life, lead us to justice and peace.” It is a boundary-breaking movement. We do not need a standard form of dialogue for peacemaking. It does not matter what your religious background is; peace is made of all the collective activities of enlivening, *salim*. Any religion that practices *jugim* against life becomes an empire. No religion can claim to contain all truth. It also cannot be denied that there are elements of truth in the different religions. In order to make peace out of violence, I suggest collecting all the constructive and enlivening points for life from diverse traditions, including mythologies, and weave them together to bloom and bear the flowers and fruits of peace. As a quality of life, peace is not the absence of violence but the presence of the fullness of life. Rather, people call for peace when there is violence. Consequently, the peacemaking march and *salim* dialogues will continue whenever the sovereign power exercises *jugim* against people, land and ecosystem. As the Salimist Goddess

Sulmoondae clarifies: the whole island of Jeju like a mother washes her children’s clothing. As long as there is a destructive force of *jugim* against life, we can’t stop continuing *salim* dialogues. For peace and justice, we have to declare a sacred “No!” to *jugim* and a sacred “Yes!” to *salim*.¹⁶

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¹ Chung Hyun-Kyung. (2001) *Goddess-Spell According to Hyun Kyung*. Yeolimwon, Seoul, 18.

² Choe Sang-Hun. “Island’s Naval Base Stirs Opposition in South Korea.” *The New York Times* 18 August 2011.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Koohan Baik and Jerry Mander. “On the Front Lines of a New Pacific War.” *The Nation* 14 December 2012.

⁶ “Jeju is on the Frontline.” *The Jeju Weekly* 3 August 2013.

⁷ Edward W. Said. (1993) *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, New York, p. 9.

⁸ Mark Whitaker. “Bush & God.” *Newsweek* 10 March 2003.

⁹ Catherine Keller. (2005) *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, p. 37.

¹⁰ Vandana Shiva. (2012) *Making Peace with the Earth*. Pluto Press, New York, p. 5.

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, New York, p. 112.

¹² *Ibid.*, 114.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha. (1990) *Nation and Narration*. Routledge, New York, p. 212.

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 37.

¹⁶ Jea Sophia Oh. (2011) *A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West*. Sopher Press, Upland, p. 33.