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Acquiring Tastes

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7sp0668v>

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Publication Date

2024-10-01

AQUIRING TASTES

On April 1, 2015, I travelled to the village of Sincheon in the southeast corner of Jeju Island, South Korea, to see a ritual to welcome the wind and sea gods. Many people have left Sincheon for the city, but those who remain still practice their traditions.

The ceremony, which can take a whole day, was shortened. But it was still led by a shaman and performed faithfully. All greeted the visiting gods, sacrificed a chicken, and cast food offerings into the sea.

Normally, a group meal using sacrificed chickens signaled the ritual's end. There was, however, just one chicken that was sacrificed. And that one was thrown into the sea. What then was on the menu? It was not what I expected.



It was fried chicken from Pelicana. When I asked about it, the response was simple: chicken means the ritual is done. Tradition doesn't say what kind of chicken.

No, this is NOT an April Fool's Joke.

This wasn't the first time I came upon something like this. Jeju has been changing A LOT because of tourism. If people's tastes are changing, shouldn't the gods' tastes change, too?

Despite so many changes, the rituals are still meaningful. The important thing in people's relationships to their gods was not so much the ritual itself, but the act of gifting.

When we say "gift giving," we might think of things like birthday presents. But sociologist Marcel Mauss argues that giving a gift isn't a casual act. It also implies a social network – in giving a gift, you expect the receiver to recognize you. And it's the same with gods.

While Jeju's traditions are indeed fading because of tourism, there's still a liveliness to it. So long as remaining practitioners gift whatever they think their gods might like, the gods continue to play an active part in their lives.



JEJU ISLAND

BOBCAT COMICS
UC MERCED CENTER FOR
THE HUMANITIES, 2024

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