

Korean Shamanism

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ABSTRACT

The religion of ancient Korea was essentially classified as “Shamanism”. It is the heart of all folk religion in Korea. Korean Shamanism or musok or mugyo in Korea is an indispensable part of Korean identity. It played or still plays important role for people on how the judgements required to be taken or how it would affect an individual faith. The features of Shamanism were existent in official government rituals for populations well-being of the nation. Korean Shamanism is most comprehensive amalgamation of Taoism and Buddhism. Shamanism is popular even today and it’s demanding to locate out its roots, philosophy and history. Notwithstanding the fact that South Korea has accomplished significant level of industrialization, Koreans still trust on tradition of Shamanism as the solutions to their different problems. This paper emphasized despite its unknown origins and past legends the contemporary time still relies on the Shamans or more importantly Shamanism. The paper tries to analyze the historical origins of Shamanism and the various spirits and gods related to it. It also establishes the ritual which is practiced by the shamans and how the new world is still holding their belief which further establishes its relevance in contemporary time. The core of Korean culture is Shamanism, which is a religious phenomenon that governs the fates of nature and man by interacting with supernatural celestial spirits, is the foundation of Korean culture.

Key Words : South Korea, Shamanism, Dan-Gun, Hanunim, Mudang, Paksu, Gut

INTRODUCTION

History of Shamanism:

It is hard to discover the emergence of Shamanism in South Korea (Eliade, 1964). The traces of ancient Shamanism can positively be derived from the ancient beliefs which mainly include myths and rituals before the foreign domination took place. It was fortunate that the information of few myths and rituals of prehistoric times was henceforth communicated through various records. The first is the Tangun Myth, which is therefore related to Spirit, and with the belief in him descending from heaven to earth as a result of which heaven and earth were united and creation did take place. Consequently, heavenly Spirit marries the goddess mother of earth who therefore took rebirth in human form and before being a human she was a “she-bear”. Furthermore, by the unification of Deity and man, a new life—the son of God was created

(Tongshik, 2012).

The Shamanism has prevailed in the Korean peninsula following the anachronistic period (before 1000 B.C). The foremost written chronicles with regard to Shamanism are at 3rd century found in the “Wei Chi, Chinese text”. The religions which were derived from the foreign countries included “Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and much later Christianity” had gradually became dominant most importantly in the influential higher class, as time passed by. Despite the increased relevance of following mentioned religion, Shamanism survived and coexisted with other religion. It was widely popular, specifically among the females and the poorer sections and was gradually transferred to succeeding generations. This transmission was structured into three (Tongshik, 1984).

The primary transmission was made with simply transmitting it with time, with the help of various

ceremonies performed in different villages or through personal practices. In this instance, there was merely no fundamental change in the ancient shamanic beliefs and practices due to the influence of other religions. Secondly, this transmission was syncretistic. This basically meant incorporation of different faith and customs of Shamanism into different religions mainly Buddhism (Kim, 2003), “Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity” (Hyuck, 2004) and also replaced the essential features of these religions with its own. Lastly, it was sublimated transfer, that included the development of distinct new religions by intermixing of Shamanism with the various well developed religions. The major example to this was Hwarangdo (an elite youth corps of the Silla dynasty) and the Tonghak movement of the Yi Dynasty (ibid.)

The ancient “Korean document *Samguk Sagi* or the History of Three Kingdoms”, which dates back to 12th century. The discoveries from the archaeological sources made in the city of Dajeon, it was apparent that rituals of Shamanist tradition was popularly practiced much before even during the bronze age (Kim, 1972).

“The Remnant History of Three Kingdoms” mentions the story of “Dan Gun” which stated that, there was a courageous and sagacious prince named Hwan-Ung who was descendant of the “Heavenly King”. The prince requested the King grant him the authority over the magnificent Korean peninsula. His wish was granted by the Heavenly King and hence the prince was sent to Earth, possessing the three Heavenly Seals and also followed with followers around three thousand. The prince reached the Earth on Tebeg Mountain under a sandalwood tree and eventually placed on the throne and he formed the holy city. He appointed three ministers who mainly were, “Pung Beg (Earth Wind), Wu-Sa (Chancellor Rain), and Un-Sa (Chancellor Cloud)” who supervised approximately three hundred and sixty officials and also regulated things such as sickness, grains, life, and ascertainment of good and evil. During those times, the bear and tiger cohabited with the humans in big caves. They prayed and the bear waited with patience enduring both fatigue and hunger. It was post twenty-one days transformed into a beautiful woman but tiger was unable to bear waiting quietly inside cave so it ran away. The bear, now woman happily paid a visit to the holy sandalwood and prayed to bear a child. Her wholehearted wish was granted and she subsequently became the Queen and later gave birth to a prince who was named as Dan-Gun or popularly as Sandalwood King. He was

recognized as the first human ruler of the Korean peninsula. He established a new capital in “Pyongyang” and changed the name of the kingdom to “Zoson (Choson-Land of Morning Calm)”. When Dan-Gun abdicated, he came known as San-sin (Mountain God) (Zong, 1970).

Hence, Dan Gun is the allegory of the “Intermediary or the Mediator of spiritual world” if the shaman is described as a connection between the heavenly spiritual world and the physical world of the Earth, Dan Gun is the ancestor of shamans. Dan Gun incarnation comprised both the spiritual and material being. He also manifested the direct and immediate expression of highest spiritual being. Thus it is regarded as the ancestor of shamans. Without Dan Gun a shaman could not successfully portray the legitimacy of the shamanistic expressions (Waley, 1955).

They believed in Hanunim, also known as the Heavenly King, who was regarded as the ultimate god above all other gods, because ‘Dan Gun’ was a ‘direct descendant of the Heavenly God’. It was an important feature of traditional faith which had been carried forward with the passage of time. Kyung Cho Chung thus draws the correct conclusion that “Shamanism (Sinkyo) indicates one god (Hanunim), which incorporates the idea of one ultimate consciousness” (Kyung, 1956).

It can be derived from the above myths and legends that the crux of Sinkyo with respect to the religion, believes in the existence of Heavenly God who is supreme to all gods. The belief of Hanunim is also an essential characteristic of Sinkyo, the ancient faith. The hanunim is purely spiritual and it is task of shamans to become an intermediary and connect with him. Dan Gun was also regarded as the supreme shaman who formed an intermediate communication between the Heavenly Spirit and earthly life in order to become a reality. The overall concept of Heavenly King was very important in Dan Gun myth. As believed by some scholars that the term ‘Dan Gun’ is borrowed from the Mongolian word ‘tenger’ which meant “Heaven” together with shamans who mediates Heavenly Spirits. Korean shamans are also known as ‘Tangur Tangur-ari’ in some provinces (Lee, 1981).

What is Korean Shamanism?:

The history of practice of Shamanism in Korea can be traced from the beginning of primordial times right up to the contemporary era. The idea of “Shamanism” has meant various things to different cultures but with respect

to early Korea, it has held its original connotation in which self-chosen people vowed to interact with and hence control the spirit world in order to help the living beings. It is a belief system which is believed to be originated from the North-east Asian and Arctic cultures. Korean Shamanism were bestowed with powers by those who believed in them. Shamanism is not considered as a religion and there does not exist any texts or dogmas which had to be followed. It also did not believe in hierarchical division of priesthood. Though, Buddhism was the official state religion as per historical records but Shamanism remained significant to the common, predominantly the peasant population (Cartwright, 2016).

Distinctly certain societies have dominance of single religion, but modern Korea does not have any state religion. But it seems interestingly noticeable that Korean beliefs and the practices in folk culture is still relevant in the routine life of the common people. Korean Shamanism or also popularly known as *Mugyo*, is a conventional religion, constructed on the faith that a multitude of gods supervise the creation and the affairs of the human. It is the only native manifestation of religion which originated in Korean peninsula, it paved the way for various adopted faiths such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity (Cruz, 2021).

Different scholars have tried to define Korean Shamanism but largely believed that defining it is problematic. Chongho Kim characterized “Korean Shamanism” as widely being “residual” which incorporates all religious practices which were not able to find a place in Buddhism, Confucianism or Christianity (Kim, 2018). Korean Shamanism is regarded as one constituent of “Korea’s folk religion” (Baker, 2008).

Korean shamanism has been differently labelled as “vernacular religion”, a “folk religion” (Yun, 2019), and an “indigenous religion” (Kendall, 2015). It is a “non-institutionalized religion” rather than being a structured religion similar to Buddhism or Christianity (Bruno, 2013). It is transmitted orally and showcases variations at regional basis as well as changes with respect to the choices of private practitioners and as the time passed it has displayed both change and continuity (Sarfati, 2021).

The primitive Koreans, performed shamanistic rituals to worship their ancestral and heavenly gods. These ceremonies were mostly performed for hunting and farming practices or for thanking the gods for good harvest. Agriculture was regarded as an important economic activity in Korean traditional society and a

solution to maintain balance of the dynastic rule. The Shamans had excessive domination during those times (Cruz, 2021).

Since the beginning of the Goryeo dynasty in the 918 CE onwards, the significance of principles of Confucianism and Buddhism gained prominence, and eventually the supremacy of shamanism decreased with respect to its influence over the government and affairs of the state. Though the queens in the Goryeo period appointed shamans for their personal use and also during the time of crisis such as droughts or floods in the state. It was during the Joseon dynasty during the 14th century CE, Shamans were exclusively not included in the royal court. They were required to register themselves, and were under the supervision of specific government officials. The major causal factor behind all this was derived from the adoption of Neo-Confucianism and disapproval largely by the aristocracy because of the practice of dancing and intermixing of sexes while performing the rituals. Despite all, Shamanism continued its strong hold over the ordinary, widely over the population belonging to the farming communities. They believed in the authenticity of Shamanism and other religions from worshipping their traditional ancestors to state-endorsed Buddhism (Cartwright, 2016).

Types of Shamans:

Shamanism of Korea is identified with two significant terminologies which is mainly Mudang and P’ansu. P’ansu or Paksu is generally referred to as male shaman which generally have inconsequential role in Korean society whereas Mudang are the woman shaman or shamaness have remarkably significant position. Thus, Korean shamanism is popularly defined as the cult of Mudang. ‘Mu’ basically connotes to “one who performs rituals” or the “performance of miracles”. Henceforth, Mu solitarily explains shamaness or shaman with respect to its usage in related. Whereas the term Dang means an “altar or shrine” (Clark, 1932).

As the female shamans were called as mudang, evidences have showed that practicing shamanism in one among of all four professions which the women were allowed to follow. The procedure of becoming a shaman doesn’t involve performing any specific ceremonial practice, or reading of any scriptures or initiation. Most of the shamans, were self-acclaimed with spiritual experiences, specifically during the time of illness and hence performed the practice. Mudang daughters

subsequently followed their mother's footsteps and hence became shamans. There was no proper temple set up where they performed rituals and practice their potential but whenever the need arose. There were certain shaman shrines, such as those in the mountains honouring Sanshin, the Mountain God (Cartwright, 2016).

A Mudang is therefore recognised as someone who has the ability to communicate with the spirits which govern the universe. These spirits do not function like the gods of the Western world, instead they control various facets of the life of people as well as the world, which includes the mountains. A large number of Korean people are of the view that they should pay respect to these gods and not to disrespect them or make them angry in any manner. It is also believed by them that if any inauspicious event undertakes at personal level, it is mainly believed due to displeasure caused to gods. They feel the desire to communicate to the gods in order to pacify them or appease them. For this reason, a Korean mudang comes into place as it connects with these heavenly spirits and also provides guidance and instruction to the believers on how to appease these gods (Kim, 1983).

The essential feature of Shamanism which distinguishes it from other cultures, of not using substances in order to communicate with the spiritual world. They typically reside outside of society because being a shaman is a difficult and stigmatized profession. There were two kinds of shamans: firstly, Gangshinmu controlled shamans, are selected by the spirits and must undergo possession ritual in order to undertake their calling. Shamans were selected by following a training period under some other shaman who is much knowledgeable which acted as spiritual mother or father. Secondly, Seseummu inherited the calling from their familial trait (Cruz, 2021).

Gangshinmu were most commonly found in the northern as well as the central regions of Korean peninsula as per the historical records. The sesupmu shamans were referred differently on different regions. One such example is that of Jeolla Province, they were typically called tanggol. Another is from the Jeju Island where they were known as Simbang. The primary use of mudang finds its first mention in the 15th century in the Korean continent but in the beginning of 19th century it was solely used to define the Jeju practitioners (Yun, 2019).

Whereas Kangsin-mu were also known as mansin (Kendall, 2015), which meant "ten-thousand gods"

(Bruno, 2013) and henceforth was regarded as "less derogatory" than the term mudang. There are therefore other words which are occasionally used to refer to mudang but at times they are controlled and used for different categories of Korean ritual experts. *Yeongmae*, represented a spirit medium, but at some occasions it is also used to define specific practitioners from the mudang community but mostly used as synonym (Kim, 2018).

The term *posal (bosal)*, originally a Korean word which is used to describe a Buddhist bodhisattva, what mudang called themselves alternatively (Kendall, 2009). Female shamans used it more preferably than male shamans (Yun, 2019). Contrastingly, certain mudang maintained that the phrase *posal* was used for the inspiring diviners who were controlled by the child spirits but refrained from engaging in kut ceremonies (Bruno, 2013).

Shamans had no religious obligations and were not affiliated with any particular entity, believers utilized them at their own risk. Nonetheless, a lot of common people believed that they had the potentiality to act as a bridge between the human world and the spiritual world. The chosang, also known as ancestor spirits are a particular category of spirits that were irking and were often held responsible for various unfavorable events. A shaman was then hired to communicate with these ghosts and discover the cause of their agitation in order to calm them down and convince them to leave the concerns of the living (Cartwright, 2016).

Gods and Spirits:

The idea of existence of gods is a significant issue in shamanism as it is evidently encouraging for the structuring of shamanism and it surrounds the elements of worship, rituals committed to these spirits and also myths associated with them. The most significant figure is shaman in any ritual of worship known as kut, divining and remaining rituals of shamanism, classification of gods which are believed by shamans needs to be inspected before any kind of exploration is made and also insights into the procedures how each god is to worshipped. Gods in shamanism have been classified distinctively into four categories:

- (A) gods that are the focus of numerous shamanic rituals;
- (B) gods that are portrayed in shamanistic artwork;
- (C) gods who are regarded as the focus of shaman rituals performed at numerous shrines, such as the

Sonangdang and Sanshindang (“shrine to the Mountain Spirit” and “shrine to the Sonang God,” respectively); and

(D) Household spirits that are the focus of shaman rites in private residences (Kim, 1996).

Musok is recognized as polytheistic religion (Sarfati, 2021). Supernatural spirits are referred to as kwisin, or sin (Kim, 2018). The deities and the ancestral spirits are divided into two broad categories by the mudang, though at times they refer to all of these entities as sin. People believe that supernatural beings are mysterious; if they treat them nicely, they may prosper, but if they offend them, they may suffer (Kendall, 2009). People who worship these deities assume they can interact, communicate, and negotiate with them. Each mudang has their own particular pantheon of gods, which could be distinct from the pantheon of the mudang they apprenticed with. A mudang might add new gods to their personal pantheon, known as the chusin, over their lifetime. A few of them will be contemplated as guardian deities, respectively known as a ‘taesin’. The mudang were bestowed with myonggi by the deities, enabling the mudangs to have visions and intuitions needed to carry out their duties (Kendall, 2015).

Deities are also known by the name of “*janggunsin*”. The number of gods has also changed with the passage of time and is referred to as sindang (Bruno, 2013). A total number of 130 musok deities have been acknowledged. The deities can be categorized between deities who represent cosmic or natural powers and those who formerly existed as humans, such as kings, bureaucrats, and generals. Some have been mainly derived from the Daoist or Buddhist traditions, whereas some are exclusively from the Korean vernacular religion (Baker, 2008). They are considered efficient of exhibiting different physical forms, that is with the help of paintings or statues, or by residing in particular locations such as trees, rocks, springs and stone piles (Kendall, 2021). As advocated by Laurel Kendall, the interconnection that the mudangs had with these spirit-inhabited locations was similar to animism. The deities were majorly in mortal form (Sarfati 2021).

Rituals and its Purpose:

Gut in Korean refers to a ritual in shamanism. It can be clearly explained as an interconnection between humans and the gods. It is therefore, commissioned by a person who need it; accepted by a deity; and then

sanctified by the shaman who here act as a mediator between the individual and the deity and the spirits surround that area. Private and village rituals are separated by the gut. The very first ones comprised rites which were performed for favourable fortune as well as long life; healing rituals; rituals to place the dead quietly to the different world including the underworld entry and some shamanistic rituals performed for those affected with ‘spiritual illness’ (shinbyeong- a combination of psychological and physical symptoms which were incurable by modern science- which need the rituals to be cured and proceed with a new life as possessed shamans). Secondly, practice of village rituals is made in order to ward off disasters that would help maintain peace and harmony within the community (Cruz, 2021).

According to beliefs of Shamanism, in order to achieve one’s goals, one must be an able to influence by the gods. By performing different ceremonies, people have tried to accomplish this. They invited the gods to participate in these rituals, entertained them as well as yielded to their wishes and submitted to their wishes. The three defined aims of the theses ceremonies were:

- 1) “To bring blessings and prevent evil fortune
- 2) To expelevil spirits and have diseases cured
- 3) To comfort and purify the souls of the dead in order to send them to the other world without causing disasters in this world”. The typical rituals of Shamanism are called kut (Tongshik, 1984).

The cheongbae comprised chanting to particular rhythms and pleading with the spirits or gods in order to enter one’s body is the first and most significant component of a kut. The drummer, who is typically knowns as kunhalmoni chants along with the shin aegi while the mudangs usually stands close to the drum. Mudang. A new mudang is required to learn the skills of dancing even if they have never danced before. This form of dance, known as “god dancing” (shin ch’um), aids in promoting and enhancing and showcasing the requisite ecstatic state in order to receive the spirits. It is a “god dance,” the beginner mudang eagerly jumping or performing energetically even though he or she cannot follow the rhythms (Park, 1982).

Nonetheless, kongsu is a crucial step in the kut and kosa, and every new mudang is required to master it. In particular as jeom, it was very hard to train as it was supposed to be spirits interacting through the mudangs and it cannot be easily learnt or memorize. Every scene or representation of kut included kongsu. It was rather

impossible to teach kongsu words, new mundang were required to learn melody and rhythm of speech (Yang, 1988). Costume-making is another aspect of preparing for the performances of rituals (Park, 1982).

The shamanistic myths, is referred to as bonpuri or songs of origin are crucial element of the rituals and it is essentially carried out by Mudang Pansori, is a type of traditional song that shares similarities with shamanic mythology (Cruz, 2021).

Contemporary times:

Seoul, being one of the modern Asian cities with plasma TVs and high-speed Internet, embraces modernity more than any other cities. An estimated number of three hundred shamanistic temples reside in the hilly areas which is not far from the city center and the vociferous ceremony is referred to as gut or goot is a daily ritual. In order to appease gods, shamans sacrifice the pigs (Park, 2012).

The 'Korea Worshipers Association', which represents shamans, estimates that there are 3 lakhs shamans, or one for every 160 South Koreans. They follow various gods and have no common scriptures, making them fiercely independent. They are also quite adaptive. Shamans were among the first to launch commercial websites offering online fortune telling when the Internet boom hit South Korea. There are a lot of young shamans that write blogs online. Professor Hong Tea Han studies shamanism at Chung-Ang University in Seoul. "Shamanism in Korea is a fascinating mixing pot. Making countless concessions to other religions and societal reforms, it never rejected anything and always embraced everything. It explains how it has endured for so long" (Hun, 2007).

Conclusion:

In Korea, shamanism has existed since ancient times and has coexisted with different religions during that time. Throughout Korea's history, it has been restricted and even subjected to severe insults. Yet, Shamanism has continued to exist in the contemporary times because modern Shamanism includes Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and (maybe even) Christianity. It thus indicates that Shamanism has a dynamic and selective tradition that has adapted to other religions around it. Shamanism's continued existence is also due to people's desire for continued blessings, which Shamanism may provide. According to shamanism, blessings only

materialize once equilibrium has been achieved. According to shamanic beliefs, people pray for each other's blessings, share meals, and dance together. Shamanism undoubtedly has certain drawbacks, such as the presence of superstition, magical abilities, and a lack of an ethical foundation. But, it also has some noticeable advantages. Those who are weak and powerless could easily associate with shamanism. It helps ordinary people recover from the wounds of oppression. It does not seem to be unattainable because it does not demand prolonged hours of meditation or intellectual training. Shamanism also serves as a catalyst for the development of folk culture, including song, dance, drama, art, and philosophy. Even while Shamanism dates back to the beginning of religious history, its dynamics may still hold the key to the development of a new civilization. It might free people from the constraints of history and human ego, opening the door to the potential for a novel, peaceful society (Chacatrjan, 2015).

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