

Invention and Reinvention in Modern South Korean Shamanism

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The historical records of Korean spiritual life establishes an essential trinity of faiths that have built the nation's religious experiences while wrestling and negotiating with each other in relative peace. Buddhism and Confucianism have long been seen the two stalwarts of the spirits and moral reinforcement, while the recent introduction of Christianity has become a symbol of modernity. However, one of the most overlooked features of Korea's pre-history, history, and current reality has been the function of Shamans within the cultural and religious backdrop of the longest unified state. With the fracturing of the Korean peninsula and the sudden and nearly all-penetrating influence of globalization, the Shamanic traditions have shown the historical ability to adapt to change in their rituals and their social roles while continuing to today.

The historical role of Shamanism was one that could not be separated easily from the everyday lives of Koreans. As a belief set, Shamanism was a relatively non-dogmatic practice set, with the enforcement of moral behavior secondary to the benefit of living humans through communication with ancestors, gods, and natural spirits. The roles filled by the Shaman were, and remain, diverse and intermingling. As one with the ability to both contact and placate the supernatural, a Shaman was a fortune-teller, healer, architectural planner, mediator, advisor, and lore-keeper. Even the line between those who were Shamans and those who were not blurred, as the distinction between the ideas of the mundane and divine were nearly absent. Just as the Shaman would know a horoscope, so too may many other individuals. Yet, those seen as truly able to understand and influence the spiritual realm were often placed in positions of reverence and authority.

In the past, Korean Shamanism has been a relatively fluid faith, adapting to the influences and dictates of power groups, both foreign and domestic. In fact, the common belief is that Korean Shamanism is itself a semi-imported idea from the belief set in Siberia, reworked for the people of Korea. The most prominent influences after the establishment in the past have been the religions imported from China, namely China's own trinity consisting of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Within Shamanic rites today can be seen obvious sources of foreign influence. Within the household-spirit appeasing rite of *kut*, Laurel Kendall notes the summoning of Buddhas into the *mansin's*, or female shaman's, body.⁵⁹ She also notes that the traditional social position of the *mansin* is one set in the Confucianistic structure prominent in the Yi Dynasty of Choson. This hierarchal structure placed the *mansin* on a level alongside female entertainers, a rather low tier. As a way of establishing fortunes and spiritual vulnerabilities, the usage of the Chinese horoscope is key, as it is also used to set the ideal dates for rituals and celebrations. The adaptations of Korean Shamanism should not be seen as a weakening of itself to foreign entities, however. Quite the contrary, the fact that the tradition continues to exist is a marvel considering the historical influences within the country and proves the flexibility and syncretism that allows its existence today.

Women and the Community of Ritual

In Kris Yi's examination of a woman of Korean descent named Anna, she finds that the woman has been chosen as a Shaman by her ancestors, the normal path for the non-hereditary *mansin*. Anna's reaction was incredulous: "Anna was frightened of this prospect and

⁵⁹ Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 12.

protested against it.”⁶⁰ The role of a *mansin* is not one taken with pride, and one not seen in line with the modern example Koreans wish to set. Kenji Hidemura claims that the post-Imperial world of Korea sees Christianity as an example of modernity and anti-Imperial sentiment.⁶¹ In order to become part of the new world, the Christian faith has been embraced and, with that, the old is transformed or, within conservative Church views, heretical. Why, then, would the traditions of Shamanism continue? Perhaps crossing the line between the past and present is the casting of Shamanism in the realm of the female. Indeed, over 70% of Shamans within South Korea are female.⁶² Of this percentage, a number must be considered to be part of the Cheju islands, where, as Halla Pai Huhm notes, both men and women are considered Shaman.⁶³ It should be taken into consideration that she makes no note of men in other areas being Shamans. Historical evidence of male Shamanism has been recorded in the mainland, as well. In the Gaya region of Korea, which populated the southern edge of Korea, evidence of Shamanic items are buried with the male dead, such as items to aid in the transportation of the soul to the spirit realm.⁶⁴ The very foundation of Korea was possible, according to myth, by Tan’gun, the divine king and shaman himself. This shift has been pointed as being one of historical importance, again with the establishment and displacement of women during the Confucianistic dominance during the Yi Dynasty. The trend continues today.

Within the Christian and Buddhist hierarchies, the tradition remains with male dominance. The Confucianist offerings to ancestors also continue to be held by the male house leader. With little else offered to women in the spiritual realm, it seems the reasonable conclusion that women turned to the marginalized Shamanism. However, the strict place of women outside the religious sphere also allows escape through the rituals, or *kut*. As documented through ethnographies, the assumed role of the Korean woman is broken down while rituals are enacted. Kendall’s portrayal of *kut* speaks multiple times of the reluctance of women engaged in the ritual to dance. Public dancing by women is strictly amoral in Confucianistic thought, yet the prodding of her peers and the need to placate and channel the spirits overrides the sense of morality. Kendall then goes on to describe the fervor with which the women dance in men’s robes or the disapproval by those who are not fully thrust within the spirit role. Within the framework of the ritual, women are allowed to open themselves to social taboo. Even as the role of *mansin* is frowned upon, society has allowed the argument that a woman has fought against the descending spirit. As the denial of a descending spirit can prove to be fatal, it is accepted that the woman has fought against the low rank in order to keep her good name but gave in at the threat of death.

Indeed, the realm of the Shamanistic world is one seemingly dominated by women. It is, more often than not, the woman who sees the *mansin*, seeking yearly divinations and asking for the performance of rituals. In Kendall’s observations, men were usually dragged into the rites and women found the presence of a man in line for a divination unusual at best:

A neighbor woman and her husband brought (a young man) to Yongsu’s Mother, everyone giggling a little at the incongruity of a man visiting a *mansin*’s house. It was as though he had cooked his family’s evening rice or pickled the winter kimche. Korean men are not inherently unqualified for these tasks, but

⁶⁰ Kris Yongmi Yi, “SHIN-BYUNG (DIVINE ILLNESS) IN A KOREAN WOMAN,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 24 (2000): 473.

⁶¹ Kenji Hidemura, *The Anthropology of Korea: East Asian Perspectives*, eds. Mutsuhiko Shima and Roger L. Janelli (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1998): 111-127.

⁶² Andrew Eungi Kim, “Nonofficial Religion in South Korea: Prevalence of Fortunetelling and Other Forms of Divination,” *Review of Religious Research*, 3, no. 46 (2005): 296.

⁶³ Halla Pat Huhm, *Kut: Korean Shamanist Rituals* (Elizabeth, New Jersey: Hollym International Corp, 1980), 11.

⁶⁴ Young-sik Lee, *Gaya: A Collection of Research Summaries Related to Gaya*, ed. The Gaya History Policy Committee (Korea: NEWWORDSA Press, 2004): 147-156.

it is the women who perform them, save in exceptional circumstances.⁶⁵

As tradition and modernity negotiate through South Korea, the world view remains one governed by men. In this, women have found networking and a spiritual role in a sphere isolated nearly specifically for them.

Korean Shamanism and Western Medicine

Traditionally, physical ailments were considered in the realm of the metaphysical, the manifestation of displeasure from the spirits. With the influence of both western and Chinese medicine, the role spirits and, by association, shamans play has been altered. The most famous *kuts*, or rituals, performed by the *mansin* are those of exorcism, cleansing, or healing. In these, the shaman rids the body of spirits and bad energies while soothing the anger of protective spirits. However, nowadays the shaman stresses the importance of modern medicine. Kendall relays from her informant:

Far from being hostile to cosmopolitan medicine, Yongsu's Mother urged her patient's wife to consult the pharmacist immediately and faulted her patient for neglecting his health. The *mansin* assume that when their clients fall ill, they will consult pharmacists, herbalists, acupuncturists, and hospitals. The *mansin* themselves patronize pharmacists, herbalists, acupuncturists, and hospitals.⁶⁶

The role of pure illness no longer falls into the realm of the spiritual. Causalities are not denied and the blame for sickness may rest on old age or overall weakness. The acceptance of one source has not resulted in the abandonment of another. While bacteria may be the physical cause of any given ailment, the reason the individual was able to be overcome by the bacteria may very well rest with ignored ancestors. With this new role, the need to hold *kut* becomes more a matter of finance and faith in the cure, leading it to become another option in a list of possible solutions. Despite this choice, it is seen to be beneficial, if possible, for those with an ailment of considerable length to consider holding the exorcism. In this web of multiple health options, there is a sense of responsibility by those who frequent a shaman to be sure that the possibility of spiritual hurts is handled by appropriate authorities. When it comes to the health of a loved one, the weight of expending all available options still rests upon the family. Yet, with this also seems to come a loophole. If the cures offered by more modern authorities take too long or the continuing care becomes a financial burden, the holding of *kut* can provide an escape in the expense of time and money.

The negotiation between medicine and Shamanism has, indeed, been a back and forth. In South Korea, it is not uncommon for the terminally ill to be released from hospital care in order to pass surrounded by family. This is a call to the traditional belief that the spirit of a family member that has died away from home or alone is a dangerous entity to the rest of the household. This movement may have an indirect effect on the organ donation rate of Shamanic Koreans, yet, the precepts of the afterlife seems to impact this far more greatly. According to Shamanic belief, the body must be whole when traveling into the afterlife.⁶⁷ Again, we see the influence of the globalized mindset impacting the religion, as the thought of removing organs from the body, especially a brain dead individual with a pulse, would have been seen a dangerous act under more traditional circumstances.

⁶⁵ Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits*, 82.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁷ Jung Ran (Therese) Kim, Doug Elliot, and Cheryl Hyde, "The Influence of Sociocultural Factors on Organ Donation and Transplantation in Korea: Findings From Key Informant Interviews," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* (April 2004): 147-154.

Revisiting the subject of *shin-byung*, or Divine Illness, the concept of psychological illness has, perhaps, been the most difficult for Shamanism to adapt. As the key of becoming a *mansin* is seen within the culture as a religious event and outside the culture as a disorder, it is quite understandable that a line has been drawn. Often, the descent of a psychological disorder is perceived as the anger of spirits and ancestors.⁶⁸ Such an ailment must be handled with placation, turning what is recognized in western medicine as an individual imbalance into one that afflicts the community. As to why a certain individual is claimed, the explanation is offered by the individual horoscopes and the vulnerability caused by it. Interestingly enough, in refusing to accept the diagnosis of western psychoanalysis, the field of psychology has turned to the works of Shamanism. Yi's own work with Anna ends in her ceasing the treatment in lieu of Shamanic rituals. By the end of her immersion into the *kut*, Anna's complaints of both emotional and physical pains had stopped. Yi then goes on to analyze the benefits and reasons the *kut* worked for her patient. In the end, Yi offers that the western approach may have to yield to the culturally specific approach offered by traditional rites. This widening approach may offer a new place for Shamanism to adapt and fulfill its role on a larger field; however, the full effects are yet to be seen.

Growth from Marginalization

Today, most Shamanic practices recognized by the South Korean government fall into the role of folklore and cultural property. Rituals are re-enacted during cultural festivals, the performers given stipends for being keepers of this knowledge. After attempts to remove the practices by the government, some rituals began to be considered "intangible cultural assets" and a link to the cultural and historical past of Korea. This movement created a unique set of circumstances in which the presentation of materials to the government would dictate the relevance of a ritual and its inclusion as an asset. In order to appeal to the senses of government officials, shamans would alter the original rituals, contextualize the songs and order of performances, and emphasize historical characters while avoiding overtly religious contexts.⁶⁹ This is a conscious reinvention of tradition as certain aspects are emphasized while others are marginalized. In the act of reinventing traditions, special considerations are given to historical figures. Walraven makes note of a festival held for General Nam I, a guardian of Seoul. This festival, resurrected after being discarded and reinstated in the 1980s, became an annual celebration instead of one held every three years and added a parade representing his military feat.⁷⁰

Knowing that there is a potential for profit and a chance to spread the faith, Korean Shamanism has actively increased its presence in the cultural sphere while remaining partially within a Divine realm. As a stage is available for once-banned rituals and a national outlet to spread the faith, Shamanism has been able to pick and choose ritualistic elements and emphasis to appeal to the larger community. For example, the wood carver Kim Jong-Heung, a master craftsman in traditional arts known first for his *haboe*, wooden masks used in a traditional play, and later for his *changseung*, met with Queen Elizabeth during her visit to South Korea. His case is interesting on two levels. On one level, the religion has adapted itself seamlessly with the modern culture beneath which it continues undetected. On another, though, the true impact of the *changseung* has been abandoned, for both modern and logistical reasons. The *changseung* are traditional Korean totems formed from a solid log to appear as a divine entity within Shamanism and used to ward away evil spirits and disease. After the Japanese occupation of Korea, only a few were left standing. The rebuilding of these would be impractical with the ensuing war and the ban instituted by the newly established government. As the option now presents itself to recreate the old icon of Korean Shamanism, it becomes again a matter of practicality and focus. Under

⁶⁸ Yi.

⁶⁹ Boudewijn Walraven, "Our Shamanistic Past: The Korean Government, Shamans and Shamanism," *Copenhagen Papers in East and Southeast Asian Studies* (1993): 5-25.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

modern eyes, the totems can be considered odd looking at best, and convincing the government to re-establish their prominent place would be a difficult task indeed. In this light, the tradition has been all but abandoned in favor of placing it as a cultural aspect with a dying religious context. Like many aspects of Shamanism, replacing these totems has been weighed and measured against the current needs and consciously abandoned.

The popularity of these reworked rites enables a trend of migration of rituals and shamans to the urban centers. This is not surprising as Korea's rural population has been cut in half since 1960. Yet, what is surprising is the way that the shamanic *kut* has gained a place, albeit somewhat hidden, in the urban areas. In Kendall's 1996 research, her *mansin* informants tell her of the rise in *chesu kut*, the good fortune ritual.⁷¹ The cost of a *kut* was once seen as a major investment, and in a way it still is. Because of this, traditionally a *kut* would be reserved for healing and placating house ancestors. The rise in wealth, especially in cities like Seoul, has allowed for the increased use of the costly luxury practices. The Shamanic ability to adapt is seen even within the rituals. For instance, shamans now recognize wood imps that sneak in with the wood of a television or the spirits of new cars.⁷²

The movement from healing to wealth rituals is also evident in the practice of modern medicine. The recent ability for an individual to earn surplus income, especially with its traditional association to nobility, has led to a new source of illness:

If, as the shaman Yongsu's Mother sees it, anxiety over money ultimately makes people ill, then the antics of the spirits are therapeutic insofar as they parody the very ambitions they extol, injecting a capacity for laughter into the serious business of finance.⁷³

Here, the old roles take up a new context. The spirits and characters conjured in traditional rites and plays are often used as a form of social commentary, portraying the greed of government officials, monks, nobles, and scholars. To placate these in *kut*, a gift of money and/or food is demanded, often repeatedly. The exceptions are the truly divine and honorable beings, which do not beg, plead, or demand, but rather know that they deserve such high treatment. Today, the greed is seen as a caricature of the actual client. Though known for their insatiable appetites and love of wealth, the spirits bow down to the wealthy who channel them for more wealth. "The portrayal of greedy spirits in *kut* becomes a fun-house mirror of client (and also shaman) aspirations as the spirits proclaim, 'Your greed is even greater than my own.'"⁷⁴ No longer are the officials channeled by the spirits a mockery of the establishment, but a mockery of the client trying to raise their status and wealth through any means.

With the urban setting and the acceptance of Shamanism as a cultural element come new opportunities for those seen as in tune with the world beyond most. Along with the increase of the *chesu kut*, geomancy and divination are apparent in modern Korea. Geomancy has long been a tradition in the placement of buildings and, more importantly, grave sites. The use of the earth's energies in conjunction with the spirits of ancestors to gain fortune is not new at all, nor has it ever been permanent, as the bodies of the deceased may be later moved to a more amiable location. The reasons for this have adapted in modern times, as former president Kim Dae-jung reportedly moved his own parents' graves to a position believed to be better for, specifically, winning a presidential election. The use of geomancy goes beyond grave-site selection, however. In Shamanism, certain directions are considered more beneficial than others. As mentioned with the *chesu kut*, the rituals and ideas have been reworked and utilized in order to benefit the community as a whole. For instance:

⁷¹ Laurel Kendall, "Korean Shamans and the Spirits of Capitalism," *American Anthropologist*, 98, no.3 (1996): 512-527.

⁷² Information on these spirits is found in both referenced works from Kendall.

⁷³ Kendall, "Korean Shamans and the Spirit of Capitalism," 521.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 520.

As mentioned above, an important principle of geomancy involves direction. The most auspicious direction is the south, which is why an inordinate number of houses, apartment complexes and commercial buildings in Korea face that direction. Similarly, many government complexes, including the Presidential Mansion, as well as university campuses face the south or at least avoid facing the north, the least favorable direction. One of the most compelling examples is found along the Han River, the river that cuts across the nation's capital. Most apartment buildings along the southern bank of the river face the south, thereby forsaking one of the most picturesque views in Seoul- i.e., scenic view of the river and panoramic view of the buildings across the river- for what amounts to emotional security. Such preference for south-facing houses is so prevalent that even the housing price varies depending on the direction of the house.⁷⁵

The usage of geomancy in the modern world has seen marked changes in context while remaining, overall, the same in practice. The need for geomancy is not seen so much as preventing the downfall of households, but rather the benefit. This change in context has also left behind some of the old reasons, now out-dated by the new governmental position. No longer is it possible for an individual to be chosen as an official minister, as the roles are elected, and so this specific purpose has been let go. With shifting ideas and ideals within South Korea on a greater level, geomancy, like most other Shamanic elements, has adapted and reworked itself to be both applicable and in growing demand in a modern context.

Conclusion

Inevitably, cultures change through developing, removing and acquiring new ideas and technologies. South Korea has been in a very unique place, as the mass influence of the modern, globalized world has swept over the country only within the last fifty years. Through that time, the country has developed from a village-centric, agricultural community into an industrialized nation with an urban center about the size of Tokyo. However, despite the push to throw South Korea into the global scene, a negotiation has been silently struck between the old ways of life and the new. Within Seoul's streets, evidence of the old kingdom's center is still seen, surrounded by blurs of cars and businesses. The Old South Gate, *mandamun*, is considered a primary national treasure and has been developed around by the mass growth of Seoul. After it was burned in February 2008, South Koreans everywhere flocked to the precious historical site, claiming their failure at protecting such a monument. This example is simply one of many in which South Koreans today work to both preserve themselves while developing in a western mold. With such a poignant display in response to the fire tragedy, it is apparent that the Korean people harbor great respect for their traditional identity. Shamanism holds a unique place in this light. As a true example of the ancient way of life, it is vulnerable to abandonment, a dam to the modernizing world. However, it remains rooted in the nation's mindset. The aged are to be respected, the dead to be placated and thanked. The core ideas of Shamanism are, in many ways, the core ideas of the Korean worldview. It manifests itself in city planning, diet, national festivals, art, and the religious life of non-Shamans.

This, however, has not protected Shamanism from the rigors of economic growth. During the Yi Dynasty and the rise of the Confucianism and *yangban*, or nobles, Shamanism was seen not only as archaic but amoral. From the start of Japanese

⁷⁵ A. Kim, 294.

occupation, the physical symbols of the religion were attacked to diminish their influence on Koreans. In the 1970s, the Shamanic rituals were considered an impediment in the movement for modernization. In order to stay relevant, or perhaps because it was relevant to the performers, the Shamans moved from role to role. As a bastion to those under the officials' rule during the Yi Dynasty, as a symbol of Korea's independence and spirit, or even as a base for economic strikes, Shamanism remains in a place between Divine and Worldly. Today, the attempt to strictly divide the two spheres has been met with mixed success. Indeed, the three major religions remain Catholicism, Protestantism, and Buddhism. However, beliefs in spirits, charms, divination, and geomancy remain even among those within other religions.⁷⁶ Even as Shamanism has been marginalized religiously and emphasized culturally, there are increases in both the number of potential *mansin* and the fame of some of the better known, almost to "superstar" status.⁷⁷ The negative social stigma attached has been reduced by the government's support of the cultural aspects.⁷⁸

If history can account for anything, it is that South Korea's traditional ties to its spirits will perpetuate. Shamans will be seen on the New Years for divinations, and the ancestors will be beseeched for success. The fluidity of the religion has allowed for it to not be isolated as a separate, irrelevant realm. The spirits do not dwell only within a church or temple, but saturate everything. Shamans are not a category separate from the rest of the population, but one's neighbor or sister. The shame once associated with admitting one's relation with the spirit realm is ebbing, adding glamour to the position. Rites are no longer limited to the small villages in the hills, but have filtered into the urban centers. Medicine and hospital care allows elements of Shamanism, as illustrated earlier regarding the release policy of the terminally ill, while Shamanism pushes for the use of modern technology in health. Arts and crafts, festivals and presentations of culture catered to the frequent foreign visitors are small symbols of once-religious import. Even the symbols used to represent the government or pepper political rhetoric summons up the traditions of old. All the while, Shamanism is being slowly canonized, establishing itself with sets of solid performances and texts in order to be presented as a true cultural entity. And, as it solidifies, it morphs, introducing new spirits and adapting old rituals to keep in pace with growth while treating it all as if it always has been. When it comes to the syncretic core of Korean Shamanism, perhaps it truly always has been.

⁷⁶ For statistical information, see A. Kim, 2005.

⁷⁷ Walraven.

⁷⁸ Ibid.