

# SHAMANISM: THE DOMINANT FOLK RELIGION IN KOREA

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Shamanism is the heart of all folk religion in Korea. The pervasive influence of shamanism in Korean culture has produced an intricate network of connections relating this underlying religious phenomenon both to the major established religions and to the new religions of today as well. Shamanism is also a common element in the religious beliefs of other Asian peoples, a point of unity amidst the rich diversity of our various cultures. Therefore in this paper I will comment upon problems related to folk religion in Asia in light of shamanism as it is seen in Korea.

## THE PLACE OF SHAMANISM IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS IN KOREA

**Archaic shamanism.** Korean shamanism is a survival of the primitive religion of the past. The first written record of religious life in ancient Korea is found in the Chinese text *Wei Chi* which was compiled in the third century. We can summarize what is said there as follows:

First, the Koreans believe in a heavenly God whom they worship in religious ceremonies performed in the spring and fall of the year. They believe that this God is the Supreme Being who rules over the whole world. They also believe in the existence of lesser Gods whose function is to control certain things in the world such as agricultural production. From time to time they worship these lesser Gods as well as the Supreme Being. Second, the religious ceremonies of the Koreans are carried out through singing, dancing, and the drinking of wine. These activities bring the participants to a state of ecstasy in which it is believed they experience direct communion with the Gods and spirits being worshipped. Third, the times at which the ceremonies are held follow the cycle of agriculture and are related to such events as war in order to receive aid from the divine spirits for the realization of a bountiful harvest or victory in battle.

As we can see from the above comments in the *Wei Chi*, the people of ancient Korea believed that they would be able to enjoy a more bountiful and peaceful life through communion with the Supreme Being and other divine spirits. We also see that song and dance were central elements in the rituals, which were the technique of communion with Gods. I would call this form of

belief Archaic Shamanism.

**The transmission of shamanism.** From the beginning of the fifth century foreign religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism began to come into Korea from China. These foreign religions became dominant in the religious culture of the elite upper class, but shamanism did not disappear. It continued to exist alongside the major religions and to be transmitted to succeeding generations in various ways.

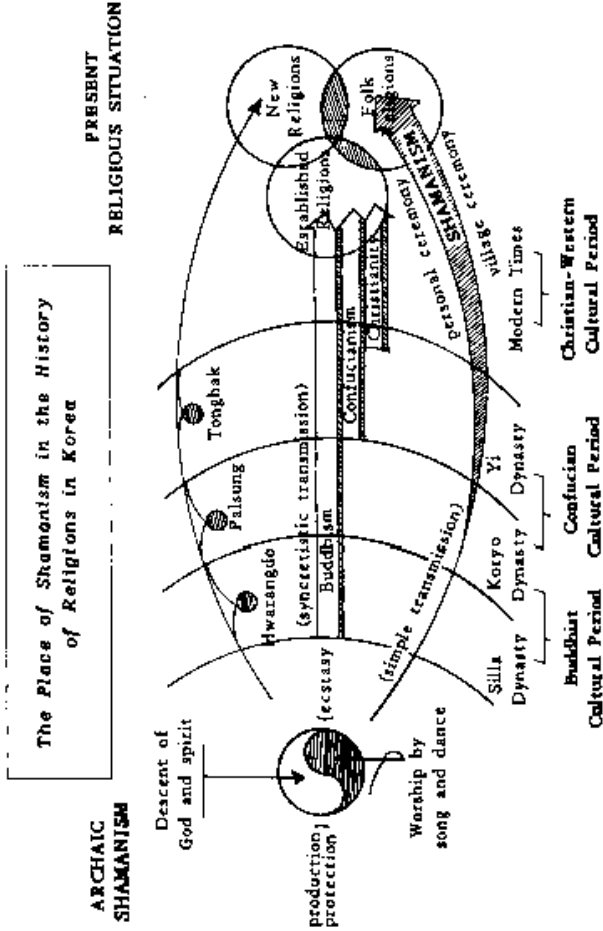
The first way is what I will call simple transmission. This was a process whereby, without relation to the religious culture development around the foreign religions, the beliefs and practices of archaic shamanism were simply passed along to new generations. Of course there were points at which the influence of the foreign religions had impact, as both terms and concepts were borrowed and incorporated into shamanistic practices. But this kind of influence was superficial and brought no fundamental change. Archaic shamanism was thus transmitted to new generations in essentially the same form in which it had existed in ancient times, and in this way has become the central element of Korean folk religion today.

Another way in which shamanism was transmitted is what I will call syncretistic transmission. This was a process in which shamanism was passed on by being incorporated into the beliefs and practices of other religions. In a sense we can say that shamanism invaded the other religions, replacing some of the essential substance or meaning of them with its own. For example, while certain rituals and ceremonies appear on the surface to be those of Buddhism or Confucianism, in essence the content is often shamanistic. Another way of putting it is to say that shamanism survived and grew by disguising itself in the clothes of the foreign religions. This type of development is particularly evident in the history of Buddhism in Korea.

Finally, there was also a form of transmission which I will call sublimated transmission. This process took place as the substance of shamanism emerged in different, new forms of religion mediated by the established religions. The Hwarangdo (an elite youth corps) of the Silla Dynasty and the Tonghak (Eastern Learning) Movement of the Yi Dynasty provide typical examples of sublimated transmission of shamanism in the past, and we can also see evidence of it in the new religions of today.

The various ways in which shamanism was transmitted as discussed above is illustrated in the diagram on the facing page.

There are a few points that we should notice here. First, shamanism is so pervasive in the history of Korean religions that it became an almost universal element in all religious phenomena in Korea. Therefore we have to have a kind of dialogue with shamanism in order to communicate the Christian gospel. Second, shamanism has been functioning as a basic religiosity in understanding other religions including Christianity. It provides, for instance, some basic ideas such as the concept of *Hananim*. This concept, which in shamanism refers to the heavenly God, is used in Christianity with reference to the biblical God. This means that there has already been a kind of dialogue between Christianity



and shamanism. Third, shamanism does not always dwell in a definite religious form, but simply exercises its substance in its own form or some other religious form. It is a religious guerilla, which teaches the Christian Church how to survive in this complicated, pluralistic society.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF SHAMANISM

**Beliefs.** From the perspective of shamanism it is neither human beings nor nature which rules over the world and the things that happen in the world, over life and death, over good fortune and bad. These things are the acts of the Gods. At the heart of shamanism is the belief that there is communion between Gods and human beings, and in order to control natural events or one's own destiny one needs to have the right relationship with the Gods who are the source of power. In other words one must be able to persuade the Gods to control things as one wishes.

Those who believe in shamanism try to do this through certain rituals. In these ceremonies they invite the Gods, entertain them, listen to their will expressed in oracles, and obey them. The ceremonies have three main aims: (a) to bring forth blessings and prevent evil fortune, (b) to expel evil spirits and have diseases cured, and (c) to comfort and purify the souls of the dead in order to send them on to the other world so that they may not cause disasters in this world. The value structure of shamanism is thus centered around a concern for worldly blessings. Even in the ritual held for the departing spirits of the dead there is more concern for the peace and comfort of the remaining survivors than for the dead person's peace and happiness in the other world. The ultimate concern of shamanism is to bring satisfaction in the present life here and now.

**Worship.** The rituals of shamanism are called kut. They are related to two of the basic cycles of nature that affect human life. One is the life cycle itself. When a child is conceived, a kut is held to please the guardian spirit who watches over new life and to pray for a safe and easy birth for the baby and for security during its growth. As the child matures and reaches the point of marriage there is a kut to get rid of misfortune and to pray to the Gods for blessings on the new couple so that they can start their life together in happiness. At various other points in life also, a kut may be held to pray for a long and happy life without illness or other calamity and with riches and honors in full measure. Finally, when a person dies there is a kut to pray for a safe journey and entrance into the other world.

The other cycle of nature that determines the times for a kut is the annual cycle of seasonal changes that affect agriculture. Various ceremonies are held in the spring to pray for good fortune during the year. As spring is the time of planting, this is also the time to pray for an abundant harvest. Thus villagers will gather at the time of the First Moon to perform the ritual of "treading on the earth God" as a way of preventing misfortune. As the crops ripen, they

again hold *kut* to pray for a rich harvest. The Eighth Moon and the Tenth Moon are times of thanksgiving, so at those times rituals are held to offer the new harvest to the heavenly God.

As we see from the above examples there are some *kut* which speak to the private, personal concerns of individuals or families and others which speak to the common concerns of a larger community. In general the rituals held in connection with seasonal changes more often address community concerns, while those that mark the rites of passage through life are focused on the individual. The *kut* is performed at times of change: changes in human life and changes in the seasons. That is to say, at points of crisis in human life the *kut* provides a means for direct communion with the Gods and spirits which control things, and thus a means for preventing or overcoming the crisis.

**Structure of the *kut*.** Large-scale *kut* usually consist of twelve sequences. This does not mean that every *kut* is divided into exactly twelve sections, however. Just as twelve months make a complete year, so it seems that twelve of these sequences make a complete ritual, or as one might say, a "full course" of *kut*. There are also simpler *kut* aimed mainly at preventing calamities.

In each of the sequences the shaman conducting the *kut* calls on a particular God with a particular function and, in complete ceremonies, the different sequences follow each other in a definite pattern:

*Sequences 1 and 2:* Introductory sequences to purify the place of the ritual and call down a host of Gods.

*Sequence 3:* A prayer for protection.

*Sequence 4:* Expulsion of evil spirits.

*Sequence 5:* *Taegam*, the deity of richness, is invited and prayer is made for blessings of wealth.

*Sequence 6:* *Chesok*, the Buddhist heavenly God, is invited and prayer is made for long life.

*Sequence 7:* *Sungju*, the heavenly deity who supervises the world, is invited and prayer is made for peace.

*Sequences 8 and 9:* Prayers are again made for protection and for expulsion of evil spirits as in Sequences 3 and 4.

*Sequences 10, 11, and 12:* The shaman worships the guardian Gods and offers sacrifices to various spirits in order that there may be no evil consequences.

Each of the sequences in a full *kut* follows almost the same pattern. First the shaman calls down the God who is the object of the ritual. This is ordinarily done by singing an invitation to worship. Then the shaman starts to sing and dance to a special tune and rhythm accompanied by instruments playing shaman music. This is done in order to please the God who was invited. The pace of the singing and dancing increases until it reaches a frenzied point and the shaman goes into trance. In this ecstatic state the shaman is in direct communion with the God and conveys the words of the God to those watching the ceremony. Those words may be warnings or commands, or they may be promises of blessings to be received. When this is over the shaman sends the

Gods back to their places by singing songs of praise and by dancing.

The point of particular significance here is that the medium of direct communion with the Gods is that of song and dance. Entrance to the world of the spirits is through rhythms of the body, not through meditations of the mind. It is the singing and dancing that bring persons into the state of ecstasy where, in direct communion with the spirits, they go beyond ordinary human existence and reach a transcendental state of simultaneous existence in this world and the next, in the world of the flesh and the world of spirits. Also, the reason that the kut is seen as a form of diversion, even as a kind of entertainment, is that in bridging the gap between the worlds and bringing human beings into this transcendental state it provides an avenue of escape from ordinary existence.

#### THE MEANING OF SHAMANISM FOR US TODAY

As Christians our understanding of the world is shaped by our relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord and we look for meaning in all things in terms of that relationship. Accordingly, we must look at shamanism in this light and try to understand it from a Christian perspective. To put the problem in more positive terms, we need to look at shamanism to see what God is saying to us through it.

Of course we know that there are negative aspects of shamanism. It is widely spoken of as just so much superstition, or as something that involves magical powers but has no ethical dimension. We cannot simply dismiss these negative aspects, but I do not want to dwell on them here. Instead I want to bring to your attention a few of the positive aspects of shamanism that I think, from our Christian perspective, we need to recognize and learn how to respond to.

**The people's religion.** The first point is that shamanism is a form of religion to which estranged and oppressed peoples—the poor and powerless—can relate. It makes sense to them and fills their needs in a way that the major established religions often do not do because it does not require long periods of meditation or intellectual training. In Korea it was generally not the poor but members of the elite ruling class—the rich and powerful—who adopted the major religions that came in from China. Neo-Confucianism, for instance, was a dominant religious force among the upper classes for a period of some five hundred years but never became the religion of the people.

Everyone has problems in life and everyone has a need for some kind of religious faith to provide support and strength in searching for ultimate solutions to the problems. This need is intensified when people are alienated, and especially when they are alienated not only with respect to the social structure but in relation to the established religions of their society as well. In the Korean setting shamanism has provided a faith for the alienated masses. It is no accident that shamanism flourished during the Yi Dynasty as the

religion of the people at precisely the same time that Confucianism flourished also as the established religion of the ruling class. Its function for the ordinary people was to give them access to direct communion with the spirits as a means of dealing with the problems of life.

In general the two basic kinds of problems that ordinary people had to deal with were on the one hand those of poverty and disease and, on the other, social oppression. Regarding the first, shamanism provided a solution through direct appeal to the Gods for health and prosperity. As for the second, the solution that shamanism offered was the release of accumulated feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment. These feelings, which we call *han*, could be laid before the Gods in the rituals of shamanism where, for instance, the spirits of the dead could give voice to the resentments of the living and thus release the *han* of the people. By providing such mechanisms for the release of *han*, shamanism was a healing force that bound the wounds of oppression and contributed to the recovery of humanity for a de-humanized people.

**Living (primitive) spirituality.** The second point for us to consider is that shamanism has provided a force for the preservation of primitive spirituality. By primitive I mean the unsophisticated responses of natural man to the intuition that the world does not operate on its own in a monistic fashion, but rather that there is a guiding force or forces which transcend human existence and are ultimately in control. In other words, there is recognition of the existence of divine power. The kut breaks down the wall between this world and the other world, between the world of physical reality that we live in and the world of the spirits, and by offering a means for direct communion with the spirits it provides for divine intervention in the solution of problems in this world.

Here we can see two important meanings. The first is that the tangible world we see before us does not comprise all forms of reality or all modes of existence. Shamanism is far from secularism. It is a system of belief that brings balance to existence in the present world by recognizing its relationship to the transcendental world of the spirits. As a practical example of the way shamanism bridges the two worlds, we can point to the release of *han* in this world by words of the spirits of the dead now living in the other world. Shamanism thus brings hope to people living under oppression in a troubled world. It keeps them from despair and gives them courage for living in this world by showing them the existence of the divine world which encompasses all things. The second is that direct contact with the world of the spirits is made through physical means. It is not the meditations of the mind but the movements of the body in the rhythms of song and dance that brings the two worlds together. This is a reflection of the lifestyle of the masses of ordinary people, those we call *minjung*, and it means that shamanism brings them a practical realization of the fact that religion is not merely a matter of ideas but something that involves the whole person.

**Shamanism and culture.** Finally, we need to consider the fact that shamanism is a driving force in the creation of folk culture. The various expressions

of traditional Korean folk culture –song, dance, drama, art –have their roots in shamanism, and this means that the culture itself is imbued with a sense of the spiritual. The farmers' dance is a typical example which illustrates the point. In its original form this dance took place outside to the accompaniment of instrumental music and was done together by the villagers as they went to the fields to work. This was not simply for the sake of entertainment, however, as the dance was in fact a religious ceremony related to the God of agriculture. It was a form of kut, and whenever there were other community rites in a village the farmers' dance had a leading role in them. The farmers dance is a form of shamanistic art which brings religion together in harmony with song, dance, and labor.

Another example is the masked dance, a form of folk drama accompanied by shamanistic music and traditionally containing seven sequences. The masked dance had its origin in the kut and is religious entertainment belonging to the people (minjung) and expressing their view of the world in dramatic form, for the world view of shamanism which it portrays is the philosophy of the people. It has the following characteristic themes.

First, there is a positive affirmation of life. Life is represented by sex, for instance, so the dramatic content of the masked dance is filled with sexual symbols. One could say that this stands for "resurrection of the body."

Second, the established authorities are brought down to the level of the people where their weaknesses can be exposed. In a sense the masked dance is a kind of religious play which provides entertainment while doing this as well as releasing the *han* of the people. Members of the ruling class and religious priests become objects of ridicule as their falsehood and corruption are exposed to the laughter of the audience. The established social system and its authority structures are portrayed as reversible, not absolute. Things can change –at least in the drama –and in the meantime the people can laugh at them the way they are. By providing for such expressions, the masked dance becomes in effect a program of human liberation.

The third characteristic theme is the victory of the people. The heroes of the drama are two young men called *Chwibally* and *Malttuki*. They are symbols representing both shamanism and the people and they are always seen as happy and energetic. Although they are of the lowest social status they are philosophers with the world at their feet. They are free, dynamic and victorious. Full of confidence, they portray persons united with God. They are the people.

The features of shamanism discussed above represent some of the possible points of contact for dialogue with Christianity. The form of dialogue with folk religions will be a kind of mutual interpretation. Folk religion should be interpreted in the light of Christian belief, and Christian belief should be reexamined in the light of folk belief that we interpret.