Korean Shamanic Practice in Cyber Culture[1]

Seong-nae Kim (Sogang University, Korea)

Cyborg Mudang "Cysha" Aborted

In September 1998, the appearance of cyborg mudang 'Cysha', a character invented by a Korean internet service company, drew wide attention from the mass media.[2] One of the major internet service providers in Korea, LG Internet, announced that cyborg mudang Cysha would descend from a mountain after an apprenticeship and become active on its internet service, Channel *i*, by the end of the month. The name Cysha was arrived at by combining the first syllables of the words "cyber" and "Shaman". Cysha takes the form of a ten-year-old cyborg named Child Spirit (*Agi Tongja*) of indistinct gender. The rationale for the virtual creation of this cyborg shaman lay in the 'redemptive' role of Cysha as a helper of suffering Web users or *netizens,* eradicating computer viruses and noxious pornographic sites.[3] Cysha would also instruct them on the use of shamanic talismans *(bujok)* and provide fortunetelling. In its service "Do you believe in talismans?", anyone could download talismans for personal use and also use talismans as screen savers. The birth of cyborg mudang Cysha forecast the virtualization of shamanic practices.

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Within a matter of weeks of Cysha being introduced to the public, LG Internet was forced to abandon its plans when faced with intense public opposition. Some netizens opposed the idea of a cyborg shaman because, they believed, such a superstitious character was an anachronistic throwback to earlier times and had no place in a high technology cyberspace era. Others were worried about cyber mysticism. But there were also other netizens who supported this idea for its novelty. Those supportive netizens said that such 'digital' talismans could be substitutes for the traditional functions of old-type 'analog' talismans, those made by real shamans in prayer, and if even virtual talismans could comfort suffering hearts of netizens, the efficacy of a cyborg shaman would be sufficiently acceptable.

Although the birth of cyborg shaman Cysha was aborted due to public accusations of superstitious practice, actual Korean shamans are now already active in cyberspace. At the time of writing, twenty internet web sites of Korean shamans can be found under the address of "shaman" or "mudang". I call these shamans having web sites "cyberspace shamans or mudangs" or "internet shamans." It is predicted that the number of cyberspace mudang sites will quickly expand as more of the general Korean public go online. Instead of disappearing into the background with the advent of high media technology and information society, Korean shamanic heritage is indeed surviving in the cyber world and undergoing significant transformation even though it is still in its incipient stage.

In spite of materialistic prosperity and technological progress, the human search for an ultimate answer to anxiety and the uncertainties of life remains the same. The religious imagination continues to feed the human desire to seek to move beyond reality, which, in the age of information technology, is virtual reality—that is, a reality which is constructed by means of electronic communication and a hyper-mediated environment such as the world wide web or the internet world in the general sense. This phenomenon is characterized by new terms such as "techgnosis" (Davis 1998), "electronic LSD" (Rheingold 1991:353) or "electronic ecstasy" (Baudrillard 1983).

Although the activities of Korean shamans in cyberspace are presently small scale and neglected by main-line traditional shamans and shamanistic researchers, it is worth exploring the emerging new phenomena that have occurred in the light of Korean shamanic heritage. In this paper, I examine the contemporary transitions which Korean shamanic heritage is undergoing in cyberspace and explore the impact

of these transformations on shamanic heritage itself. First of all, I will examine the types and features of current cyberspace shamanic practices through case studies. Next, I will discuss the nature of virtual religiosity and suggest future visions for the virtual transformation of the Korean shamanic heritage. Perhaps the era of cyborg Cysha has not come yet, but it is anticipated in the new hi-tech environment and lifestyle—hyper-mediated cyber culture.

Types of Cyberspace Shamanic Practices

Cyberspace shamanic practices in Korea have grown rapidly since 1996, following closely the growth trends of internet business and personal use of computers. In 1996, Puche Tosa, a forty-year-old male shaman, was the first mudang to open an internet home page. His home page (http://www.dosamail.com) received 163,000 hits in February 2000 alone. The popularity of internet shamanic sites turned explosive in 1998 during the IMF crisis when young Koreans lived under the twin anxieties of bankruptcy and unemployment. The internet shamans who open home pages are mostly twenty and thirty year olds who are already accustomed to electronic communication and immersed in a cyber life-style. For them, online internet contact with clients seems to be more natural and preferred to the old-fashioned face-to-face consultation.

Cyberspace mudang web sites are divided into two types: informative and commercial. The informative sites mainly focus on providing general information about the history and religious tradition of Korean shamanism. These sites are usually run by shamans designated as living cultural treasures and by the national association of shamans. But the majority of cyberspace shamanic practices belong to the commercial type, selling online talismans or running fee-based email divination, which is referred to as email counseling or consultation. Although one shamanic web site often combines these two types of practices, there are still clear distinctions between the two.

The Informative Site: General Information about Korean Shamanism

The informative type of shamanic site usually specifies its objectives as providing general information about Korean shamanism which may not be easily accessible to the public, particularly the younger generation of netizens, and also to correct public misconceptions of shamanism as superstition or pseudo-religion. A typical informative site is Kyunggi Province *Todang Kut* site (http://www.mudang.com). This site is run by the Preservation Association of Invisible Cultural Treasure, *Todang Kut* (Shamanic Rite for Village). This site has a detailed description of the

Todang Kut ritual performance and also the life history of the living cultural treasure Master 0 Subok who is in charge of preservation and regular public performance of *Todang Kut*. This site provides a reference menu of shamanism related terminology and also English descriptions for non-Korean visitors.

Another informative site is "Korean Shamanism" (http://shamanism.view.co.kr) which is a kind of a portal site.[4] This site is run by The National Association of Indigenous Religion. This site has two parts: "The World of Korean Shamanism, seeking harmony and ecstasy of *kut*" and "Famous Shamans in Korea". "The World of Korean Shamanism" has four sections: the history of Korean shamanism; the structure of *kut* (shamanic ritual performance); the various genre of *kut*; and shamanic deities. This part provides a general knowledge of Korean shamanism in a rather academic writing style. The other part, entitled "Famous Shamans in Korea," introduces personal profiles and specificity of shamans, mainly members of the National Association of Indigenous Religions.

In the section on "Famous Shamans in Korea" the names of hundreds of shamans are introduced in order of location of their shrines and offices. They are carefully selected according to qualification standards regarding priestly virtues such as personal character, spiritual capacity, social service, and artistic talent. On the homepage of each individual mudang there are information menus covering such things as personal life history, specialty, and a location map. The website manager runs a bulletin board service where the mudang announces the time schedule of the *kut* performance, and also replies to on-line questions about shamanism. Any visitor can ask questions and discuss relevant issues with the site manager. The numbers of visitors on Dec 4th of 1999 was 9,524 and the hit rate is increasing as the site manager continually adds more new participating shamans.

It must be noted that the informative type of site contains a section which provides the background story and original rationale for opening the site. The common theme of such narratives is how deeply the shamans lament social prejudice against their practices. The story ex-

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4   There is another portal site on Korean shamanism, www.shaman.co.kr. This site was open in 2001 and provides much more varied content than the "Korean Shamanism" site, including information about shamanism in other places in the world, for instance, Mongolia, Japan, India, and so on. This site is run by a weekly newspaper company, *Segye Musok Shinmun*, literally meaning World Shamanism Newspaper.

presses their assertion that shamanism is the Korean indigenous religion and traditional culture. Also in the case of commercial-type sites, they include some mention of similar narratives of resentment toward social prejudice as well as general information on Korean shamanism.

The Commercial Site: Shamanic Talisman Sales and Counseling

The commercial type of shamanic practice consists of talisman sales and fee-based counseling service. These commercial sites are more popular than the informative ones. Because of the direct pricing method used, this type was often suspected of pseudo-shamanic practices and thus became a target of a self-purification campaign by leading shamans. In spite of these negative perceptions, however, the shamanic talisman sales and counseling service in cyberspace have become a common method of publicizing shamanic activities.[5] Here are typical examples.

Case 1. Dolmani's House
Here are lucky talismans. You must think this is something strange to see in the modern world. But who knows if your present bad luck would turn into good luck? Please select talismans according to your age. In addition, Dolmani offers various kinds of talismans for everyday use. If you need it, please send an email or leave your name in the visitor's room.

Everyday use talismans: 30 luck talismans useful from the first day to the thirtieth of the month. 18 talismans useful for moving, college entrance examination, marriage, romance, new furniture, new clothing, new car, new job, promotion, friendship, birth, travel, business, school examination, birthday, wealth, school grade, etc.

Price: 4,800 won for all 48 kinds of talismans.

Case 2: Paekamkwan House
Please click the talismans if you want to know about details. First, select the desirable item. Check on the item box. If you click, you can see the talisman ahead. Before your payment, you would see the invoice ahead.

Wish Fulfillment Talisman	Price: 10,000 won (=US$ 9)
Three Misfortune Avoidance Talisman	Price: 10,000 won
Good Luck Talisman	Price: 10,000won

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5   The commercial sites are found in the category of "business and shopping."

In addition, there are counseling services: personal lot (fee:5,000 won), marital affinity (fee:10,000 won), naming (fee:50,000won).

Second, pay online to the account given below. After checking the receipt of money, detailed counseling will be sent.

These two cases are the typical examples of cyber transactions of shamanic talismans and counseling. If you send personal information about your birthday (year, month, day, time), pay on-line to the account of the shaman counselor, and click on the desirable talisman item at the web site, the talisman will appear on the computer base screen whenever you open the computer.

There are also other kinds of cyber divination service following the principles of Chinese philosophy such as I-Ching. It is no longer unusual to find computer terminals at department stores and amusement parks. Computer divination has been extensively used in popular places, but its capacity has expanded drastically due to the power of the Internet. In cyberspace, real-time divination has become available, and people can visit divination sites by accident or for curiosity while navigating cyberspace.

Because diviners' sites are open to any visitors and also free from social prejudices against shamanic practices, it is highly likely that cyber talisman sales and counseling by shamans will increase further.

PERSONAL MOTIVE OF CYBERSPACE MUDANG: A CASE STUDY

The development of online shamanic practices has occurred because it has become easy and cheap in terms of personnel and equipment for the shamans to open an internet site. The first cyber shaman to take advantage of the possibilities of the internet for both informative and commercial purposes was Puche Tosa (Fan Taoist Hermit), whose personal name is Kim Kwangsu. He set up his internet home page (http://www.dosamail.com) in 1996. He is a forty year old male shaman. Before he became a mudang, he worked briefly as a dietitian at a small company. He had to quit his job when he became seriously ill from a hallucinatory dream. In his dream, an old man appeared and asked him to go up the mountain, and then the shamanic deities and family ancestors appeared to him. His mother, also a shaman who knows the difficult life of a shaman, finally accepted his fate was to become a shaman and helped prepare his initiation rite. After his initiation, his life was turned upside down. He became isolated from society. If he came home after a light drink or socializing, his guardian spirit, Grandfather Spirit, would

scold him harshly. So he stopped going out. He was still young and interested in romance too. But every secular interest and emotion was prohibited. So in the solitude of the night, he took up computers and web-surfing as a pastime. It was during the early days of media hype about the future expansion of the internet.

He explains his personal motive for opening his own internet website:

> Once I visited a religion site by accident. I could not find any information about shamanism except Christianity, Buddhism, United Church, and other religions. So I decided to open a site that could help people understand what shamanism is.

Immediately, his internet site had to face deeply rooted social prejudice against shamanism. He was blamed for deluding the world and deceiving people by means of modern conveniences. Despite initial negative reactions, however, his internet site has become popular among Korean netizens. Within three months of opening, his site received over ten thousand hits. Once he became famous in the internet world, weekly journals and monthly magazines competed to report about his personal history and online divination practices. His website home-page was the model for subsequent internet shamans.

Puche Tosa says that the initial motive was to provide correct information about shamanism. The second purpose was to change religious communities' prejudice towards shamanism and persuade them to be open-minded toward religions other than their own. In short, he started his internet service with expectations of religious dialogue with the wider public. He emphasizes the chief function of the mudang as a soul counselor to help people overcome their daily difficulties, and to teach them to understand shamanism as a religion of harmony.

His internet site has six menus: email counseling ("soul counseling"), Korean *musok* (shamanic folklore), mystic talismans, Korean folk culture, and newspaper articles. All the menus except the talismans menu and email consultation are comprised of general information. The mystic talisman menu is for display only and not for downloading or sales. If anyone needs a specific talisman, he/she could consult with Puche Tosa via the email-counseling menu.

The email-counseling menu has four items which range from individual and family relationship problems to business investment and com-

mercial transaction problems related to real estate sales and purchases. A special item is concerned with counseling about shamanic ritual and prayer. In this case, the price of counseling is not specified. In fact, there must be off-line contact between Puche Tosa and clients. For the first two years of internet service, Puche Tosa offered free counseling for the sake of publicity. Once his site became famous, however, he changed his mind and charged a fee for counseling. The price ranges from 20,000 to 50,000 won depending on the case.

In his "soul counseling", he consults with clients by combining online and offline communication. If clients send personal messages about their problems, he replies in a long letter according to whatever instant inspiration strikes him at the moment of reading the messages. At first he himself wondered how email divination without face-to face meetings could be possible. He was not quite sure because there are no shamanic spirits with typing skills. But he soon came to know that his hesitation and suspicion were wrong. Whenever he receives an email message, his guardian spirit inspires him instantly with a right divination. Once he was consulted by a man who stood at a crossroads regarding whether or not he should quit his job and go abroad for graduate study. At the moment he read the email message, he received an inspiration that the man should stay in the country.

In the case of Puche Tosa's cyber activities, we can see the continuity of ordinary shamanic practices outside cyberspace. Puche Tosa's site does not go beyond the conventions of Korean shamanic practices. He seems to prefer more personalistic contact with clients and rejects the idea of on-line talisman sales because cyber talismans are only pseudo-talismans without spiritual power. He insists that shamanic talismans can be effective only when they are made of proper yellow paper and red letters during the shaman's prayer. He said cyber talismans were indeed a fake. Therefore, when he suggested to the site users to download the 70 different kinds of cyber talismans for screen savers, it sounds like a joke. He occasionally makes new talismans and gives them away for free. According to him, cyber talismans are only means to satisfy people's curiosity, not for sale. They might have the effect of advertising actual shamanic talismans. He specifies his intention of image-only pseudo-talismans as instrumental in that they express hospitality to the site users and promote general understanding about shamanism per se.

Neo-Shamanic Features

As far as the shamanic counseling and talisman sales are concerned, there seems little difference between the internet shamans and the real shamans. Their common features are commercial practices. The commercialization of shamanic practices has been widespread since the off-site consultation such as telephone counseling became popular earlier in the 1980's, and individual shamans also began to publicize their activities through popular magazines. The religious sector was not the exception in the milieu of consumer culture where anything could be valued and exchanged as a commodity. Under titles such as "Today's Fortune", "Oriental Philosophy," "*Tojong Pikyul* (Prophetic Secret Text according to Tojong, who invented popular divination text on the basis of simplified version I-Ching in the 17th century during the Chosun dynasty), "Astrological Fortune", "Love Marriage Matching", "Fortune Philosophy" etc., telephone fortune-telling services, indicated by the area code 700, were widely used at home or at business offices. But these telephone fortune-telling services have been rapidly replaced by internet services as the internet-user population has grown. Probably, in the beginning of internet shamanic services, the internet sites were used originally for the extensive religious service by shamans, but soon concentrated on cyber counseling.[6]

The emergence of cyberspace mudangs envisages the virtual transformation of shamanic heritage and requires a new paradigm of shamanistic studies. Growing shamanic practices in cyberspace have resulted in the transformation of shamanic heritage from the inside. The shamanic practices are inclined towards individual ecstatic power acquisition and psychological counseling rather than religious ritual service. This trend of neo-shamanism, to borrow Michael Hamer's termi-

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6   Cyber counseling has become the most typical and popular service of the cyber shamans. For example, the site "Beesul Mysteries" (http://fortune.gazio.com) which was opened in 2002 by the Korean Female Shamans' Friendship, boasts 300,000 clients. It emphasizes the message, "you can control your destiny with the shamanic technique of mysteries." Its use of moving image in the counseling in which the shaman talks directly with the client seems very persuasive, especially to the new generation of netizens who use mobile phones.

nology, is replacing traditional Korean shamanism.[7] I would characterize these Korean cyberspace mudangs as a type of neo-shaman.

The cyber neo-shamans mostly tend to follow the conventional way of forced initiation and related psychic syndromes, such as *sinbyung*, against their will. However, the next phase of the career building process is individual-oriented. According to self-portraits described on their internet sites, the neo-shamans tend to build their career by self-learning from all kinds of popular psychology and religious literature, rather than by following the classical way of long-term discipleship under the guidance of teacher shamans or spiritual parents. Thus, most of the neo-shamans are not knowledgeable of, or skillful in, shamanic ritual performance, *kut*. They prefer calling their central work 'soul counseling'.[8] Moreover, the shamanic clients also prefer this counseling practice to religious ritual because the counseling and talisman purchase cost much less than a ritual performance. Compare the 30,000 won counseling fee with the 3,000,000 won minimum fee for a ritual performance!

The neo-shamans tend to have specialties which are highly individualized, for example, specialty in luck talisman, or talisman for health or for love-finding. This kind of specialization of practice makes for much easier and convenient access to consultation with individual clients. The traditional shamans meet a specific group and character of clients at their private office or shrine. Usually housewives and low-middle class people whose interests are focused on personal or family affairs are their major group of clients. Recently businessmen constitute a significant percentage of their clients. But the neo-shamans can encounter a much wider range of clients of various social economic backgrounds re-

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7   Michael Harner (1980) was the first scholar who prophesied the revival of shamanism in highly technological Western societies and named this phenomenon neo-shamanism. This neo-shamanism has become accepted as a sort of new age spirituality. This trend of synthesizing with other spiritual traditions and also healing practices has produced various manual type books for personal ecstatic experiences. See Gary Doore (1988) and Joan Townsend's article, "Neo-shamanism and the Modern Mystical Movement,"(1988) for an anthropological analysis of this phenomenon.

8   A female shaman of 35 year old age, Yoo Myung-ok, makes her identity as a soul counselor and a neo-shaman very clear in her autobiography, *Mudang without a Shrine* (2000). In spite of the fact that she passed the initiation rite with a prominent traditional shaman, she refused to learn the singing and dancing necessary for shamanic ritual performance, and instead concentrated on counseling and fortune-telling.

gardless of age, gender, occupation, or religious faith. The neo-shamanic clients could be basically *anyone* who navigates cyberspace. Therefore, the shaman-client online relationship is arranged *anytime,* instantly and conveniently. In some cases, online shamanic service could be extended to off-line direct personal contact, but the main emphasis is on the on-line counseling in this cyber neo-shamanic practice.

Social Implications of Virtualization

The popularity of internet shamanic practices can be attributed to the inherent characteristics of cyberspace: virtualization and deterritorialization. By definition "cyberspace" indicates the artificial and virtual space which is constituted by digital information and maintained by electronic, globally networked communication.[9] In cyberspace, human emotion and experience are transformed into information which is accessible to participants from any location. Hence the virtualization of real time and space, real human subject and material object occurs here. Virtualization means "becoming other" and implies deterritorialization of "spatio-temporal phenomenon" associated with it (Levy 1998:17). Cyberspace exteriorizes the interior reality of experience and interiorizes the exterior reality. In this displacement of reality and experience, cyberspace opens a window to the cosmic flux of information, blurring the notions of unity, identity, and location, which entail deterritorialization.

Virtualization and deterritorialization in cyberspace gives rise to a paradigm shift in human consciousness and life style. Cyber culture does not indicate just a localized territorial culture in cyberspace; it envisages a totally new paradigm in life style which is trans-territorial and transcendental in terms of time and space. Conventional barriers of communication disappear. Anyone can have access to all information anytime. As one clicks into the computer network and navigates through cyberspace, one can collect and use information for individual purposes. Internet navigators are both information transmitters and receivers. There is no original place of information. The equalizing effects of interactive information exchange result in an endless array of informational linkages where the origin becomes the copy, and vice versa. The boundary of center and margin is blurred and then mutually interpenetrable.

9 Cyberspace is, in a narrow sense, a communication space newly created in the computer mediated communication environment. But its implication extends to the whole range of everyday life style medicated by the internet. See David Haken (1999:2) and Mike Featherstone & Roger Burrows (1995:5-7).

In relation to the Korean cyberspace shamanic practices, the significant impact of virtualization lies in the fact that cyberspace gives rise to an environment that fosters the growth of marginal groups and minor religions. In terms of information processing speed and its expansive capacity, the internet is superior to other media such as newspaper and television. Cyber-media is much more efficient in the formation of public opinion through a real-time feedback process. In cyberspace, there is the convenience of immediate question-and-answer communication. In the real world, due to limits of time and place and concerns for the sake of appearance, Koreans usually hesitate to visit shamans directly. But in the cyberworld, these kinds of limitations and hesitations are not a problem. Physical and moral barriers collapse in cyberspace. In the same manner, cyberspace shamans also responds to the visiting clients with greater ease.

A typical Korean cyberspace shaman, Puche Tosa seems well aware of the social efficiency of interactive communication in cyberspace. He does not insist on the authenticity of shamanism per se. Instead, in a rather modest light-hearted voice, he expresses more or less a balanced view of religion. On the screen, he describes the purpose of his internet site as follows:

> "By means of a civilized instrument, I wanted to correct the prejudice against *musok* (shamanic folk practice) and spread proper understanding of our folk culture. I thought this (internet service) the most efficient method to teach people who are not knowledgeable about what *musok* is. And my project has been successful so far. (Laugh)
>
> I trust you would help my rather absurd project. It might be individual freedom of thought to despise *musok* as superstition or pseudo-religion. But please do not neglect forcibly the fact that *musok* is a living religious phenomenon and also elementary religious belief which is alive vividly in the veins of Korean people. Although we are living in the world dominated by science, there exists a mystical area beside *musok* which scientific logic does not explain. I am sincerely asking people of other religions to stop denigrating *musok*! It might be fine with me if you just come by my site light-heartedly and acknowledge its place. I hope that you open your mind and cast off your prejudices."

His appeal to the general internet public is not assertive or forceful but rather apologetic and modest. He tries to convince the visiting clients to accept the shamanic presence in the cyber world, and furthermore to justify his own philosophy of shamanic divination as follows:

> "Cyber divination is not just fun or a curiosity. Our life is so precious and thus untestable or replaceable by anything else in the world. Even though our fate is fixed, we must put it in tune and try to improve it. Depending on our efforts, our fate could be changeable. Please do not compare my email divination to other fortune-telling services in cyberspace of which are based on the Chinese philosophy of the I-Ching. Puche Tosa is not a fortune-teller but an 'ecstatic shaman'. Puche Tosa's counseling is equipped with a sense of responsibility, and it would help change your fate and improve your life."

In this context, Puche Tosa stresses his identity as an ecstatic shaman with a moralistic sensibility. He establishes for himself the authenticity of his cyber divination while rebuking or neglecting the spiritual effects of talismans that are sold and bought directly in cyberspace. But he is also in the practice of selling talismans even though it is only a minor part of his internet service. Literally differentiating his off-line talisman sales from the on-line sales, he seems to cling to probably the last bulwark of traditional shamanism: "commercialism is not the true character of Korean shamanism." Nevertheless, Puche Tosa's internet practice is located on the verge of self-transformation of Korean shamanism into virtual shamanism.

Nature of Virtual Religiosity

The virtual transformation of shamanic practice is attributed to the nature of cyberspace and virtual religiosity. In cyberspace there is no hegemony of the real reality—virtual reality reigns. The virtual world remains terra incognita for people who stand hesitantly at a crossroads, holding to the value system of real reality. Virtual reality not only expands our consciousness but also transform fundamentally our understanding of person and world. The internet information servers and consumers are indeed transformed into a *cyborg,* an amalgam and combination of human and artificial intelligence. A cyborg is indeed an intelligent machine or "a cybernetic posthuman" which is not easily divisible like the dichotomy of body and soul, humans and robots, and humans and supernatural beings (Hayles 1999:2). This is a different construc-

tion of human subjectivity. Once information has lost its body, "embodiment has been downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman" (Ibid.:5). In the flux of continuity and discontinuity between a natural self and a cybernetic posthuman, the liberal human subject can be articulated within a context of virtual reality. The netizens who inhabit cyberspace all become cyborgs (Taylor 1999:132).

Given the ambiguity of personal and social identity (gender, age, race, nationality, locality, community) or religious faith, the cyborg netizens can enjoy the efficiency and pleasure of virtual communication. *Everyone* can have access to all information *everywhere.* When everyone is everywhere, this is the dream of virtual reality. The achievement of omnipotence and omniscience is not to be nowhere but to be everywhere at once. The all-at-oneness of the internet is, Rheingold insists, "a form of out-of-body-experience" or "telepresence." (1991: 256) Telepresence as a communication medium was primarily invented for remote-sensing — a medical operation exemplifies the typical communication system in cyberspace and virtual reality. Telepresence as an experience of being present in a remote location creates a sense of the technically sublime, the moment of what Baudrillard describes as "the ecstasy of communication." (1983, cited in Taylor 1999:139). By the ecstasy of communication, Baudrillard means a mode of disappearance, a passage into the dissolution and the transcendence of a form. Ecstasy is then not simply a real form of religious experience but the genuine property of virtual religiosity.[10]

The first spiritual cyborgs were probably shamans, those ecstatic technicians of the sacred (Davis 1998: 132). Following Eliade's elegant definition of shamanism as the archaic technique of ecstasy, shamanism consists of virtual reality per se and thus readily enters into the realm of cyber culture. Comparing the shamanic ecstasy that undergoes painful physical transformation, Rheingold describes the sheer pleasure of cyberspace ecstasy as follows:

> " Virtual reality might become the first wholesome, integrating, *nonpathalogical form of ecstacy* capable of liberating *safely* the long-repressed Dionysian energies of our heavenly Apollonian civilization." (Rheingold 1991: 356, my emphasis)

10 For an ecstatic interpretation of the posthuman cyborg, see Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, eds., *Posthuman Bodies* (1995).

Cyber culture, wherein virtual reality reigns, is essentially shamanistic. Virtual reality breaks the frame of everyday reality. People use cyberspace to get out of their minds as well as out of their bodies. The world of objects and information in cyberspace forms a "technocosmos," universal computational networks created by information technology, a navigable and transparent communication space centered on the flow of information (Levy 1998:60). In the technocosmos, all previous categories of barriers and boundaries collapse and new categories constantly appear and disappear, thus opening onto a boundless sea of virtual beings—information. Technocosmos grows like a dialectic of being, creating an open and plural culture. Individual cybernauts in the sea of virtual reality are constituted as multiple identities and subjectivities.

In respect to religious activities in cyberspace, the hierarchical relationship between priest and common believer, between the socially dominant religion and marginal religions is no longer exclusively applied. The spirit of equality prevails over conventional structures of inequality in every sphere of life. Because a single cybernaut plays the dual role of information server and receiver in cyberspace, the religious master of any internet site cannot insist on a superior status over the clients. The religious master must be sensitive to the democratic environment of the cyber world. The religious master's esoteric knowledge about the spiritual world could remain intact. But it is destined for constant modification through "the ecstasy of virtual communication" in which things and events are continually surpassing themselves, growing and expanding in power.

Moreover, the horizontal information network envisions the synchronous plural matrix of real religion and virtual religion. In the incipient stage of religious practice in cyberspace, cyberspace has been utilized mainly as a supplement to regular religious service and extensive mission work. However, cyber religion could bring about a fundamental transformation of existing religions on the inside and the outside. With convenient access to information in cyberspace, people can have much more freedom of religion and choice among the many kinds of religion exhibited on web sites. Cyberspace could accelerate religious pluralism in terms of faith principles and practices. Specific religious doctrines and faiths are transformed into information accessible to and utilized by anyone, regardless of religious affiliation. New forms of religion could be created easily by a combination of such various sources of information. Religious conversion could occur more easily free from conflict with church and priestly structure, because religious faith can be con-

veniently formed and discarded on an individual basis. In cyberspace, cyber Buddhists could easily become cyber Shamanists or Christians simultaneously, and vice versa. Erasure of embodiment and identification among the cyber religious helps the construction of "the liberatory potential of *a dispersed subjectivity* distributed among diverse desiring machines" which Gilles Delueze and Felix Guattari call "body without organs" (1983, cited in Halyes 1999:4). The tenor of religious pluralism and the dream of religious unity could be accomplished in the liberatory potential of the pluralistic matrix of cyberspace.

VISION OF VIRTUAL KOREAN SHAMANISM

Going back to the episode illustrated in the beginning of this paper: In comparison with the case of aborted cyborg shaman Cysha, if cyborg Christ or Buddha were to appear on the internet, would people express directly such outcries of abhorrence? In fact, there have already appeared several cyber Buddhist temples and Christian churches active in cyberspace. The Buddhist netizens can worship cyborg Buddha and attend Buddha's Birthday religious rites. If the tenacious distrust of shamanism as a religion were to diminish, and shamanic practice be tolerated as just one of many cyber religions, cyborg shamans like Cysha and cyber shamanic shrines could then appear.

Cyber culture would promote a pluralistic religious matrix and the virtualization of shamanic faith. Cyberspace shamanism would have fundamentally different features from real shamanism. However, real shamanism as substance would never be disassociated from the virtual reality of cyberspace shamanism. Through information processing management, the virtual serves to link the threads of multitude subjective realms of real experience and emotion and explore new frames of truth and aesthetic dimensions. As a sculptor of the virtual, the cyborg shaman could coordinate variegated life events in the vast sea of information linkage known the world wide web. The cyborg shaman could be a new type of artist who provides a new form of hospitality to help the individual cybernaut appropriate information without fear and resentment of proselytism. Of course, the cyborg shaman would never be a substitute for the actual shaman. Though given a human name and clothed in a human character, the cyborg shaman is an imitation or simulation of a real shaman. But it is a harmless virtual entity in the true sense.

Therefore, in this context, Korean netizen accusations against cyborg shaman Cysha as superstition prove to be unjustifiable. Their misconception of Cysha as a sort of real shaman is rooted historically in

the public contemptuous treatment of Korean shamans and shamanism. The controversy over the emergence of cyborg mudang Cysha suggests that Korean shamanic heritage should be located in the rapidly computerizing public culture. Korean shamanic heritage is officially valued as a cultural treasure to be preserved and transmitted to the next generation. Several shamans actually are appointed by the government as living human treasures and they are respected as cultural artists. However, with the exception of those few shamans designated as living cultural treasures, Korean shamans in general are still perceived on the popular level as charlatans, and their shamanic practices as superstitious. The general public considers shamanic heritage as a pre-modern tradition, the usual practice of which is permeated deeply in everyday life but ultimately destined to be abandoned. For this reason, people secretively seek the shamans for advice or divine solutions in case of urgent problems. It is believed that the shamanic heritage remains in the clandestine domain of contemporary Korean life. This is the cultural background against which the appearance of cyborg shaman Cysha brought about such an outraged response from many Korean netizens.

Even though the internet is currently used by few shamans for limited purposes such as talisman sales and email counseling, Korean shamanic tradition can benefit from cyberspace practices because of the genuine nature of virtual religiosity as illustrated above. Together with cyborg shaman like Cysha, actual cyberspace shamans could reach a much wider potential clientele and more netizens if they realized their proper position in the virtual reality. Especially, confronting deep-rooted social prejudices, the Korean shamanic tradition could be more effectively publicized by means of the vast, open and democratized practices in cyberspace. The readiness of Korean shamans to adapt themselves to the virtual environment—meaning when Korean shamans dare to become cyborgs—will determine the future direction of the Korean shamanic heritage.

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