

KOREAN SHAMANISM AND ITS REMINISCENCES IN ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *In South Korea, Shamanism, Buddhism, Christianity and Confucianism coexist peacefully and regardless of their religious affiliations, South Koreans celebrate Christmas, Buddha's day, perform Confucian rites for dead ancestors and in case of sickness, bad luck or in search of a life partner, they consult a shaman. Although the Korean Society has passed through much technological progress in a short time span, the traditions seem to be still maintained alive by the family elders, but they are extremely adaptable to the new technologies and public desires. It is not unusual to see promotional announcements on the streets or online, which offer shaman fortunetelling services, Buddhist temples that offer short stays or meditation retreats, Christian Churches promoting themselves etc. From among all of these, this paper focuses on Shamanism and on its influences in the Korean Culture, on its remains in today's Korea and on the young generation's opinion about it. The research is based on a questionnaire administered to 35 South Korean nationals living and working or studying in South Korea. The findings indicate that Korean Shamanism still plays an important role in the lives of Korean people, although the young generations tend to distance themselves from the old indigenous beliefs while they are young, but go back to them as they age.*

Keywords: *South Korea; Shamanism; Korean culture; technology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Shamanism, or *musok*, is "an indigenous set of folk practices" (Tudor, 2014:34) which claim that alongside the natural world, it also exists a "metaphysical realm of spirits" (Tudor, 2014:34). This 'world' can be contacted through ritual ceremonies (*kut*) performed by shamans (*mudang*) for the purpose of receiving help in hard times or finding out the future, achieving good fortune, cure diseases, etc. (Tudor, 2014:34). The practice of Shamanism on the Korean Peninsula has been present continuously throughout Korea's history, starting before the creation of the country and did not stop until present times. Its influence on the peninsula is a major one and it helped create the uniqueness of the Korean culture, Korean people and also of the other religions that came later and had to adapt in order to be accepted (Kim, 2011:102).

This article analyses how South Korea was influenced by Shamanism, the usage of its beliefs system/ presence nowadays and the young generation's opinions about it. The hypothesis that guided the research is that the Koreans who turn to shamans are generally part of the elder generation

and also, even though South Koreans are still extremely traditional and maintain alive the old beliefs, Shamanism is losing ground compared to other "newer" religions due also to the technologization and modernization of South Korea.

2. RELIGIONS OF SOUTH KOREA

South Korea is a multi-religious society. According to the 2005 statistics, 53% of the population has a religion and the biggest religious group in 2005 was Buddhism (43%), followed by Protestantism (34.5%), Roman Catholic (20%) and others (1.9%) (*KOREA.net*). Shamanism and Confucianism do not appear in statistics, due to the fact that there is "no exclusive worship as a means to measure adherents" (Breen, 2004:41) for them, but their influence has been extremely deep: shamanism as a connector with the spiritual world and as a future predictor and Confucianism with its system of ethics rules regarding the importance of loyalty, filial piety, ancestral worship etc. (*KOREA.net*).

Buddhism arrived in the Korean peninsula in 372 AD and was adopted first by the royal families while the commoners remained faithful to

shamanism. Since 527, Buddhism became the official religion until its fall in 1392 when Confucianism was introduced and Buddhism was pushed “to the margins of the society” (Tudor, 2014:30) where it blended with Shamanism. The two religions mixed peacefully, a brew that exists even nowadays. Only after the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), Buddhism was finally reestablished and regained its power (Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2014). The influence of Buddhism on the culture and mind of Korean people is magnificent: around 60% of the “nationally acknowledged cultural heritages are Buddhist artefacts” (Oh, S. *et. al.*, 2010:129) and there are several Buddhist holidays celebrated by the majority of Koreans. For example, on April 8th (lunar calendar), Koreans of all religions celebrate Buddha’s day (the day when Buddha was enlightened) by lighting Lotus lamps and wishing for a bright future (Oh, S. *et. al.*, 2010:128).

Catholicism was introduced from China in the 17th century. The early Roman Catholics have been persecuted (Sinyu Persecution¹) but the religion continued to spread among the common people and remained until present times (Tudor, 2014:32).

Protestantism was brought to Korea during the 19th century by the American missionaries and created schools, universities, health care centers etc. giving Protestantism a progressive image (Tudor, 2012:33). Throughout time, the Church provided tools for modernization and had an essential role in the economic, social, political modernization of South Korea, being seen as an access to a modern civilization (Kim, 2000:114). Moreover, after the separation of the two Koreas, US became a model for South Korea to imitate, including the religious beliefs such as Protestantism. In 2012, official government statistics indicated that in South Korea there were 77,000 Protestant churches (Lee, 2014), including the biggest single Church Congregation in the world, Yoido Full Gospel Church, with more than a million members around the country (Tudor, 2014:33).

At the moment, the religious landscape of South Korea is a particular synchronicity between Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity, blended with elements of folk beliefs and shamanism. The coexistence of religions in Korea happens even inside families, being common to find a wife that is a Christian with a Confucian husband and a Buddhist child. Moreover, even if a person is a member of a certain religion, that does not stop one from consulting a shamanic fortune teller or a

Buddhist one to consult the spiritual world for support or advice (Breen, 2004: 42).

3. SHAMANISM AND ITS INFLUENCES

3.1 Generalities. Shamanism, a folk religion that can be encountered in many countries, has been part of Korean history since its beginnings. Although its history is undocumented, many rulers in ancient Korea were known to be also shaman kings. This religious practice is a multi-deity one, very holistic and tolerant. It sees women and men as having equal values, it presents no divisions between men and God, good-evil, body-spirit, it does not judge human for having certain qualities and not others. Moreover, it presents no omnipotent deity, no churches and has no scriptures. It only defends that humans were here before their birth and remain part of the nature and other humans’ lives after death, and so life should be lived to the full and humans must act with all their energies (Breen, 2004:43, 47).

Korean Shamanism also says that spirits of ancestors, even the ones of former Korean kings, generals or other important figures from the country’s history (such as General Douglas MacArthur), are the ones that have power over one’s fortunes and they have to be pleased by performing for them shamanic rituals that implore their support and blessing (Kim, 2000:116). Also, it is believed that the dead can have the same feelings as the living: they can feel cold, hungry, get mad etc. That is why during the shamanic ceremonies food is put out for the spirits in order for them to consume the foods’ essence (Breen, 2004:46).

Some scholars sustain the idea that there are two types of spirits: good spirits (of the ones that lived long lives and died of normal deaths) and the evil spirits or ghosts (that had difficult deaths such as accidents, suicides etc.) (Lee, 1984:199). Among the second category, the women who died unfulfilled are the most dangerous and there have been cases, such as in 1983, when two Korean stewardesses who died in a plane crash were married by their families with two young males who also died in the same accident (spirits’ marriage), for the purpose of easing the frustrations of the girls’ spirits (Breen, 2004:46) and not bring calamities on the living.

The Shamanic rituals are called *gut / kut* and are comprised of music, dances, settings of food and are generally directed towards wishes of wealth, health, long life and traditionally for male births. As it can be observed, the wishes are mainly material ones and are said to be sustaining the materialistic and capitalist tendencies of

¹ The first persecution of Christians that started in 1801, after the death of King Chongjo.

Koreans (Kim, 2000:116). Also, there is an affinity between shamanism and capitalism, both putting an emphasis on material success as a major goal. Shamanism had an important impact on the rise of capitalism due to giving Koreans the motivation to work hard “to realize their Shamanism-induced wish for material success” (Kim, 2000:118), meaning that even when they pay for a ceremony to receive help for an issue, they will not passively wait for a miracle, but instead will work hard to get the results they wished for, being encouraged by the fact that they did everything they could to secure success (Kim, 2000:118).

Due to the fact that it deals with “present needs of human beings” (Kim, 2011:108), Shamanism has remained an important element in Korean society until present times. However, the Koreans do not portray themselves as devotees of *musok*, a shaman being visited in case of tragedies, illnesses, difficult decision making, the same way a Westerner approaches a psychiatrist: as a consultant. (Tudor, 2012:26). Also, even though each Korean shaman has his own pantheon of gods and spirits (some including even Jesus Christ) to which they pray and communicate in order to help the clients, the latter ones don't seem to be interested in which are the gods / spirits or what is the meaning of the rituals used (Tudor, 2012:25-26).

3.2 Shamanism and its influences on other religions. As mentioned before, all the other religions that entered later in Korea, had to adapt to Shamanism in order to be accepted (Kim, 2011:102). Buddhism, for example, has blended with shamanism by accepting some of the shamanic gods, such as portraits of the shaman mountain god (*sanshin*) at temples (Tudor, 2014:31). On the other hand, shamans too have sometimes Buddha statues in their shrines, indicating that the fusion went both directions. In what Confucianism is concerned, by the time it arrived on the Korean peninsula, Shamanism had deeply penetrated the conscience of Koreans and it has been impossible to erase (Lewis, 2014:9). Later, while the official governmental ceremonies and the domestic ancestral veneration were made following the Confucian ways and coordinated by men, within the common Koreans house, Shamanism remained as the truthful religious tradition (Lewis, 2014:9) and was generally organized by women. Furthermore, due to the fact that Confucianism has dispossessed women of their basic rights and “promoted a strict social structure that was not conducive to the recognition of women's talents and dignity” (Kim, Pettid,

2011:11) women found freedom of expression in shamanism and kept it alive along the way.

Nowadays *musok* is still considered ‘feminine’ and the majority of the practitioners are women (Tudor, 2012:26). There are also men shamans (*paksu mudang*) but they are known to wear generally women's dress during the ritual and use language that is specific feminine. Also, men generally avoid “participation in the ritual, pretending they are more intelligent and believe in Confucianism and other religions” (Ch'oe, 1984:230), Shamanism being seen more as a superstition than a rational belief.

Regarding Christianity, since its beginnings in South Korea, it has been “the first and the most continuous impetus to modernization” (Kim, 2000: 113) by creating a complete system of education and implementing modern key values such as human rights, democracy, equality, etc. However, as Professor Kim, Andrew affirmed, “In South Korea there is no modernization without Christianity and no Christianity without shamanism” (2000:112). There are several reasons for this affirmation.

First, although the church has been an important agent in the economic, social, political modernization, the acceptance of the church has been achieved without much effort also because of some acceptance and understanding of the indigenous religious practices and beliefs.

Second, there has been a Koreanization of Christianity, the latter one adopting many shamanic elements, such as the stress on attainment of material aspirations through communications and prayers with spirits (Kim, 2000:115). Therefore, the Koreans that used Shamanism to resolve mundane problems through magic, prayer and rites, accepted Christianity for the same reason. (Cho, 2010:95).

Third, even before Christianity, in Korean culture existed the element of a mighty God (*Hananim* = God in heaven), that controlled the fate of human beings and was presiding over everything. Koreans used to pray to *Hananim* in hard times in order to receive support, power, etc. (Kim, 2000:116). So, when Christianity adopted the term *Hananim* as the Supreme God, a point of contact was made and the acceptance of the new religion became much easier.

Forth, by promoting materialistic success in this world and salvation in the next life, aspects that come with the acceptance of the Gospel, the Church has gained many believers along the way.

Fifth, Christianity associated the purpose of offerings with what is called secular blessings (Kim, 2000:118). One example is the practice of

the offering of petition (*sowonhungum*), a donation that the Christians make, in an envelope, together with a list of wishes. Another example is the offering of gratitude (*gamsahungum*), which is made when the believers donate money to display gratitude to God after a success occurred and to secure the continuity of God's support (Cho, 2010: 94). Another element where the import of Shamanism's 'this worldly' characteristics is the service of blessing (*chukbokyebae*), a ceremony that is dedicated to expressing gratitude to God in a special occasion such as a birthday, an achievement, a conclusion of a difficult time, etc. (Cho, 2010:94).

Sixth, there is the incorporation by the Korean Christian clergy of the roles of shamans: presiding memorial services at the person's home, services for new houses or in case of relocation, new starting business or companies in trouble, healing of the sick and exorcism (Cho, 2010:95).

The seventh and the last one, can be easily observed while participating at a Christian meeting in South Korea. The participants are engaging by clapping, singing or even dancing, with cases of persons that said they underwent ecstatic experiences or even possessions, all these being very similar to the shamanic rituals, where the shaman induces similar states in the participants of a traditional rite (Cho, 2010:96).

3.3 Shamanism and Korean culture. With reference to Shamanism's influences on the Koreans' life, beyond religions and religious beliefs, it is important to mention the practicality and the pragmatism that it encourages, the focus on the present moment and what is beneficial now, not putting accent on the ultimate purpose of life (Ki, 2011:106), the afterlife etc. Shamanism has no philosophy or systematic theology, no concept of sins or after life, the only thing that is sure is the fact that one's destiny is not under her / his control, everything being under supernatural power (Kim, 2011:106). Other influences can be found on the way of thought, music, paintings etc. (Cho, 2010:96). The aesthetic design of *kut* (the ceremony) and the folklore of mythical stories are seen as a culturally specific custom and are promoted as Korean culture (Schlottmann, 2010).

Some authors sustain the idea that shamanism features philanthropy and equality because it always stood on the side of subdued classes (women, farmers etc.) and encouraged the Koreans to share benefits with their neighbors at critical moments (Seo, 2013:40). It has also been seen as an important part of the culture of suppressed people during the demonstrations of 1970s where

elements of shamanism were used as "symbols of national struggle" (Seo, 2013:40). One example of symbol is *jangseung* (Korean traditional totem pole) that is usually located in the villages, towns, sometimes even near Buddhist temples, parks etc. and has the role of a guardian against outside dangers, diseases etc. or as a boundary-marker between towns, villages. Usually it can be found in pairs (male and female) or more than a pair (Choi, 2006:116, 120). In the end, it is important to add that "the best way to understand many religious movements or social phenomena in Korea is by understanding Shamanism" (Ch'oe, 1984:232).

3.4 Shamanism and modernity. As South Korea has rapidly developed in the last decades, the religious practices that were before oriented towards "health, harmony and prosperity of the small family farm" (Kendall, 2009:143) have been redirected "to match the aspirations and anxieties" (Kendall, 2009:143) of the present times. The majority of the ceremonies are nowadays related to business failure, the irregularity of the market or financial anxiety in general (*American Museum of natural history*). The uncertainties, the instability and high-stress of Koreans lives makes them search a sense of security. Some find in the shamanic *kut* an image of blessing to bring with them into their uncertain lives (*American Museum of natural history*) while others find it in other religions. Nevertheless, the number of people who follow religions in Korea has been increasing continuously (Park, 2012).

Although in the last decades, due to the continuous urban development, many old shrines have disappeared, people have moved to cities, live in apartment blocks where they lack the space to accommodate traditional rituals such as *kut*. Additionally, the neighbors get disturbed by the noises made during rituals and so the shamans have moved their business in commercial spaces (*American Museum of natural history*). As a modernization process and in the face of increasing competition with Christianity, Buddhism and Shamanism have made efforts to modernize their practices by introducing production and distribution of tape recordings of famous monks, mass media publicity, usage of modern equipment in the temples and appeals for donations to build temples (Hogarth Kim, 1998:46) (in case of Buddhism) and online fortune-telling, commercial web-sites etc. (in case of Shamanism).

As Lee Hae-Kyeong, a shaman from Seoul says, "We live in an age of science, but we all know that there are supernatural forces."

(Schlottmann, 2010) so the technological advancement has not eliminated the religions and folk beliefs in South Korea, but has helped them to develop and made them more accessible to all people.

Therefore, all the changes in the last decades have not diminished the people's interest in consulting shamans. Even wealthy *chaebol* (conglomerate) owners and politicians have turned to shamans in difficult moments of their careers or before elections (Tudor, 2014:35). Many of them, however, being ashamed or afraid to be seen as superstitious, are known to pay their personal assistants to arrange a good luck *kut* for them (Stine) or request their wives to visit a clairvoyant to check their future (Breen, 2004:47).

Regarding the costs of the services a shaman can provide, a basic consultation, known in Korean as *jeom*, can cost some tens of dollars, while a *kut* can go until 10,000 dollars (Tudor, 2012:29). The basic consultations can also be carried online, by email, KakaoTalk (Korean messaging application) etc. (Stine). Although there are many people that are ashamed to admit somebody in their family is a shaman or that they themselves are visiting one, in the last years the number of practitioners has been increasing, and even foreigners have become registered shamans (Stine). Moreover, although Shamanism has been persecuted and so driven underground for a long time, in the new Millennium, interest in it has increased, due also to *Hallyu* (Korean wave), which brought many western students in Korea in their desire to learn more about modern and also traditional Korea (Stine).

4. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

97% of the participants to the survey regarding Korean shamanism and its reminiscences in one of the world's most technologically advanced countries were in their 20's, while the remaining 2.9% were in their 30's. As far as gender is concerned, 65.7% of the respondents were female, 31.4% male and 2.9% maintained gender confidentiality.

For the question "What do you think shamanism is?", the responses were very diverse. While 6 out of the 35 respondents admitted to not being familiar with the concept, an equal number of participants to the survey believed that shamanism is related to superstition and myth, with some defining it a "somehow reliable superstition". However, most of the respondents shared the belief that shamanism is related to the communication between human beings and supernatural experiences, completely unrelated to

scientific references. The same majority agreed on the fact that shamanism has its origins in traditional Korean culture, being an outworn concept which conjures up memories of negative events, such as the Japanese colonial era and the 6.25 Korean War, which, one of the respondents claims, were the result of a Korea weakened by old technologies, old mentalities and an old system, in general. Among other popular opinions regarding the meaning of shamanism, there was the idea that it is a practice used to escape from reality and see in the future, to provide comfort and mental stability and one respondent believed that shamanism a religion based on nature.

Only 34.3% of the participants to the survey admitted to ever meeting a shaman, 20% of them making use of their services, with 65.7% of the respondents never having encountered a shaman and 80% never having used the services of one. Even though the majority of the respondents never met a shaman or resorted to the skills of one, 11.4% of them confirmed that they will appeal to a shaman and 48.6% of them acknowledged the possibility of using the skills of one in the future, while 40% responded that they will never appeal to a shaman. Among the respondents who gave a negative response to this question, the main reasons they provided were that they do not believe in shamanism, that shamans are frauds and that getting in touch with the supernatural dimension is a scary thought.

When addressing the reasons why people resort to the services of a shaman, the majority of the respondents agreed that one of the top reasons is to find comfort in times of anxiety and when they have certain problems in their lives, mainly because a shaman has supernatural abilities that help them look into the future and find answers to their issues, but also because they can perform certain rituals that can help solve the problem. A part of the respondents also agreed that people who visit shamans are usually older and superstitious, while a similar number admitted that they do not understand the reason why a person would visit a shaman.

The final question of the survey addressed whether shamanism will continue in South Korea, considering the technological advancement and the modernization of the society, with 80% of the respondents providing a positive answer. The justification for this answer was mainly related to the human nature and a human being's need for reliability, dependency and belief in something more powerful, which is beyond the human condition. Furthermore, it was widely agreed that there is no correlation between shamanism and

technological advancement, as shamanism deals with psychological issues and the concerns of people, which technology cannot tackle. The general opinion is that shamanism is a religion to which people resort when they are faced with problems and anxiety, when they feel worry or fear, giving shamanism a permanent character as long as humanity exists. According to other opinions, shamanism is kept alive by the fact that it is a part of Korean tradition and that it is deep rooted in the Korean way of thinking, especially among the senior citizens of the country.

Only a small number of respondents answered that shamanism has no future, mainly due to the fact that the number of people believing in this religion is decreasing compared to the past and because it is a very improbable religion, with no certainty.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Shamanism has been part of Korea all along its history, sometimes in plain view, other times hidden and persecuted, but never forgotten and always contacted in hard times. Although many Koreans, especially men, refuse to accept that spirits have control over human destinies and consider shamanism as primitive and embarrassing, they do not get in the way of their wives organizing *kut* for them or getting advice for them from shamans. Their opposition is “merely a pose before the world” (Kendall, 1985:33). Young people also seem to not be interested in such folk beliefs but do admit that someday in their lives will contact a shaman and get advice or help to pass over a hard time. Thus, regarding the hypothesis of this paper, that the Koreans who turn to shamans are generally part of the elder generation it seems to be correct, although there is no official data to back up this affirmation. Also, it must be added that the shamans and also their followers are mainly women.

Furthermore, the second part of the hypothesis, that Shamanism is losing ground compared to other “newer” religions due also to the technologization and modernization of South Korea, this part is for sure not accurate, due to several reasons. One, is the fact that shamanism seems to adapt to any change that appears in the Korean life style and actually the modernization becomes a support for advertising inside and outside Korea, making it more visible and accessible. Second, for the support it gives to Koreans that have a stressful life and are in search of a way to receive strength and outside support, from this world or the spirits one. And third, due to the deep rooting that Shamanism has in Korea and

important number of influences the folk belief had on Koreans, such as flexibility, acceptance of other beliefs and pragmatism, but most of all adaptability, aspects that had “a positive effect on religious tolerance in general in Korea” (Tudor, 2012:33) and on Korean culture. For all of these and many others, Shamanism will remain an important part of Korea.

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