

The Ambivalent Perspective on Shamanism in the Joseon Era of Korea

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ABSTRACT

The Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) was founded based on Confucian ideology, which strongly emphasized rationalism and formality. As it influenced the entirety of the Joseon society, shamanism which had been branded as an 'obscene and superstitious practice' by the Confucian ruling class, was oppressed institutionally on various dimensions, from the life and manners of people to rituals throughout the Joseon era. However, it was able to survive, gaining advocacy from ordinary people as well as the support of royal families. Although the predominant view on the Joseon era posed an anti-syncretic religious landscape based on a powerful Confucian identity, various religions co-existed under the multi-religious circumstances. This ambivalence still exists in today's Korean society in terms of shamans.

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1. Introduction

The Goryeo Dynasty (高麗, 918-1392) was founded on the basis of Buddhism, focusing on surreal idealism and its cultivation as state philosophy. Contrary to Goryeo, Joseon, the succeeding dynasty (朝鮮, 1392–1910), was an era rooted widely in Confucian values that preceded rationalism, reason, formality, and norms. The Confucianism of the Joseon Dynasty, which strongly manifested anti-syncretism, had a well-organized system as the official religion based on the theory of legitimacy that preserves cultural purity and authenticity [1]. In this process, Confucianism blocked popular practical religions such as shamanism, Buddhism, and Daoism with theories of anti-heresy and indecent rites. This attempt resonated especially among the then-emerged Confucian elite class because monks and temples at the end of the Goryeo Dynasty had accrued infamy due to their corruption. It accelerated the negative views on various religious activities of the state-religion of Buddhism and folk religions including shamanism and Daoism. The ruling class consisting of Confucian elites branded them as unofficial and heterodox beliefs.

During the reign of King Seongjong (r. 1469-1494) in the mid-Joseon period, 'Docheopje' (度牒制, a certificate of qualification given to a monk) was abolished; the government actually prohibited people from entering the Buddhist priesthood. In the reign of King Jungjong (r. 1506-1544), the state examination for monks was abolished. Henceforth, monks could receive Docheopje for a while after performing militia activities and statutory labor, yet the establishment firmly persisted in its exclusive



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view on Buddhism. In this way, while Buddhism was officially suppressed, its religious value was still recognized among common people and even some members of royal families. Apart from a few royal temples, most of the temples were able to sustain themselves by relying on commoners and accommodated folk religions, including shamanism, which was deeply embedded in people's lives. Shamanism was consequentially influenced by Buddhism [2].

The predominant view on the Joseon era poses an anti-syncretic religious landscape based on a powerful Confucian identity. However, under the multi-religious circumstances wherein various religions co-existed, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and folk religions can indeed be syncretized either arbitrarily or involuntarily. Shamanism especially, along with Buddhism, has played a role as a guardian of observing ritual traditions through an inclusive approach, occupying the popular faith under the shadow of the ruling religion of Confucianism. Shamanism conforms to the state religious-norm rather than challenging Confucian order and morality. As for the Confucian approach, the unorthodox customs of shamanism constantly became objects to be excluded as obscene practices. Applied to shamanism, 'eumsa' (lit. obscene practice), was later replaced with the term "superstition" by the Western missionaries amidst a modernization wave in the 19th century. The Japanese colonists confined shamanism within a cognitive framework by emphasizing the uncivilized and underdeveloped social constitution of Joseon (Korea) to justify colonialization [3].

The Rhee Syngman administration (July 24, 1948-April 26, 1960), established after independence (August 15, 1945), contributed to positioning shamanism as only an irrational and unrealistic custom that encouraged people into indulge in illusion by enforcing pro-Christian policies. In this regard, in terms of shamanism, Korean society at present is still mixed with an application of double standards. In other words, two perspectives exist: one view of negative convention, which symbolizes as well as breaks down ideas of primitivity and uncivilization. On the contrary, the other manifests that shamanism is worthy of being preserved as cultural property and as a vault of traditional treasures. The social circumstances during the 1970s-80s, wherein people resisted military dictatorship at the height of a pro-democracy movement, redounded to the image of shamanism, which had long been repressed as an obscene practice and superstition, despite its long-standing history. Common people prostrated themselves to the symbolic image of shamanism. In addition, the recent atmosphere for respecting cultural diversity has vitally shed new light on shamanism in terms of academic and cultural capacity.

2. Method

This study will survey the history of shamanism, which has stood as an indigenous faith in people's lives and look into its role and significance. According to Suh Young-Dae, shamanism transcendently dates to the Neolithic era of Korea [4]. With a contradictive identity compared to Confucianism, shamanism was most suppressed institutionally, yet the ruling class including not only Confucian scholars but also the royal families, relied on shamanism for the treatment of diseases or sending the spirits of the dead to heaven. Clearly, there is no shortage of these ironical cases. The examples mentioned above reflect how deeply shamanism took strong root within general life during the Joseon Dynasty. The early Joseon era is an incunabular period of ambivalent view on shamanism. Accordingly, this study will include the range of research from the early to late Joseon era, in which abundant documents regarding shamanism are found and shamanism seized the opportunity of a blooming shamanistic faith parallel to the disorderly times.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Cultural Archetype of Joseon: Neo-Confucianism

As Confucianism came into the Song Dynasty of China, Confucian or Mencian scholars interpreted Confucian thought as a meta-physical system of nature and principle (性理),

righteousness and principle (義理), or principle and material force (理氣), which referred to Neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200) compiled the thought in Song Dynasty. Neo-Confucianism took Confucius and Mencius as masters of lineage and ruled out Daoism and Buddhism, claiming that they were cults that conducted wicked summons. Neo-Confucian cohorts also suggested family-centered kinship and nation-centered moral norms for social communities, evolving as core thoughts.

Neo-Confucian thought matured primarily in terms of two perspectives: social human relationships and individual cultivation. The Rites of Zhou (周禮) was valued highly, and social morality and propriety were stressed. At the same time, meta-physical quests such as the cosmological principle and human nature broadened, so that Neo-Confucian scholars established a foundation to criticize Daoism or Buddhism from meta-physical viewpoints [5].

3.2. The Joseon Period and Shamanism

Korean society in present times has paradoxical views on shamanism. On the one hand, there is the perspective of shamanism being a deceptive superstition. On the other hand, shamanism is perceived as a representative cultural archetype; this positive perspective of shamanism has emerged relatively recently. One of the great transformations that appeared in the modern era can be a positive perception of shamanism. In general, shamanism was prone to being considered an “obscene practice” and seen in a negative light in Korean society; it was criticized and excluded by Confucian scholars from the mid-12th century of the Goryeo Dynasty. Even today, shamanism is seen in a negative light [6].

Shamanic rituals including ‘gut’ were openly performed even in small villages or communities until the mid-Joseon era. The background of these unceasing shamanic rituals lies in the taxation known as ‘Muposeh’ (tax on Shamanism). In fact, this tax, coined during the end of the Goryeo Dynasty, was effective until 1895, the end of the Joseon Dynasty. Accordingly, shamans who would pay taxes officially undertook the duties of shamanistic rituals in each region. ‘Muposeh’ was implemented to suppress shamanism; however, ironically, it resulted in authorizing it, and enabled shamans to perform religious activities officially. Another reason for sustaining the lineage of shamanism is attributed to Neo-Confucianism, which excessively stressed meta-physical norms and forced common people to have Neo-Confucian ways of life by establishing state-run local self-governing bodies and district magistrates [2].

Confucianism was just an approved convention wherein the literati class exclusively enjoyed their hereditary and aristocratic privileges including ownership of lands, and rights to education, applications for state exams, and governmental posts. The common laity considered that Confucianism, which represents morality of the world, constantly strove after the state and its concerns of the present. Confucianism was not able to achieve an autonomic religious circle to develop voluntary morals or education as well as doctrines on redemption. It also denied people the satisfaction of having hope for the advent of a messiah, apocalypse, transcendental value, or destiny, all of which were perceived as irrational and indecent expressions of individual desires.

This elitist practice failed to thoroughly pervade the lives of the populace. Its vacancy was filled with shamanism, Buddhism, and other autonomous and popular religions. They continued to considerably influence the religious lives of the commoners. Their charitable gods promised all the people who had the needed affection and sympathy, of fulfillment of their wishes. Many fests and rituals full of sensuality attracted people by appealing to their emotions. Particularly, those conventional and “immoral” shamanistic rituals that worshipped a variety of spirits provided people with utilitarian rewards and faith on transmundane redemption [7]. Shamanism had a female-friendly trait even though women were severely shunned and segregated from men throughout the Joseon era.

Shamanism not only did not discriminate against women, but worshipped minor spirits including many goddesses, and help people attain secular wishes such as wealth and longevity. In this context, shamanism was the only religious practice wherein women could satisfy their religious needs [8]. It cannot be overstated that isolated women and the propensity of rationalism that resided in Confucianism paradoxically became the powerful engine to maintain shamanism in Joseon.

3.3. The Employment of Trance

Trance is prevalent among religious practitioners and is an example of “altered states of consciousness” (ASC), often referred to as techniques of ecstasy. Both make up an important and fundamental part of the shaman’s practice. The reasons for shamans to enter onto ASC vary. They perform ‘gut’ or divinatory ceremonies to heal an individual or invoke good spirits for the benefits of the whole village or even the nation. ASC may also play a role in the funeral rituals of a community. The shaman led the soul of the deceased, guiding them safely to the realm of the dead. ASC employed by the shaman to communicate with other-than-humans help undertaking mystical workings such as healing or facilitating travel between the realms. The spirits of the dead are said to find their way with the help of ‘gut’[9].

3.4. Roles of Korean Shamanism

To some scholars like Eliade, shamanism was seen simply as a technique of ecstasy [10]. However, on the other side of the academic circle, scholars allude to a shaman as an entity who has the power to overwhelm animal souls as support for hunting, as well as pay attention to the animistic characters of shamanism [11]. Stevens and Stevens insist on perceiving shamanism as a series of colorful and attractive art. The resplendent modifiers such as sacred artists, poets, musicians, meditators, ritual presiders, dancers, or singers may be named after shamans. In their study, shamanism is classified into the following four categories: healing, accessing new or lost knowledge, developing power, and prophesying or foretelling [12] [11].

Incantatory abilities and artistic sensibility were emphasized as the nature of shamans in the Joseon Dynasty, which led them to presiding over a variety of rituals with authority and as experts. They were not able to attain official support from religious bodies since shamanism had never formed any independent orders; shamanic rituals were thus not performed by organized religious orders either. From the late Joseon period, shamanic rituals were practiced in various fields according to an objective, some functions, a scale, or time, upon the request of clients who had wished for ridding disasters and bringing good fortune [1]. Among the natural disasters that were required to be rid were droughts, while personal adversity was caused by sickness. Thus, in this chapter, we will look into the state-led byeolgeun (別祈恩, the ritual for blessings that served the god of mountains and rivers), giwuje (祈雨祭, rainmaking ritual), and chibyeong-gut (illness-healing ritual) in order to examine gut and understand its structural aspect. ‘Gut’, performed in the Joseon Dynasty, is somewhat difficult to describe, but has similarities to exorcisms performed in Western culture. Shamans did not just drive wicked spirits away, but also negotiated with them or contacted them in a state of trance; they recognized that spirits transferred to the divine realm through commiseration and reconciliation in the liminal sphere [13].

3.5. Byeolgeun and Giwuje

Byeolgeun (別祈恩, the ritual for blessings that served the god of mountains and rivers), a ritual for luck and sacrifice to avoid disasters, was one of the representative state-managed shamanic rituals. Shamans did not preside over Byeolgeun at first. Instead, Buddhism performed it until the mid-Goryeo Dynasty during the 11th and the 12th centuries. In the early Joseon Dynasty, the ritual

became a regular seasonal performance that shamans participated in. Until the 17th century, Byeolgeun was usually taken care of by shamanism. Accordingly, shamans presided over the ritual. The rituals as collective fests were held at famous riversides or mountainous spots, along with songs and dances. The family rituals developed substantially during the Neo-Confucian revival. The Chinese classic in the 17th century, titled *The Family Rituals of Master Zhu* (朱子家禮), played an important part in strengthening the moral fiber of society by standardizing major social rites of passage according to Zhu Xi's reconstruction of the orthodox Confucian forms and principles.

As befitted a state ritual, hundreds of people participated in it and dozens of horses carried related items. Its scale was akin to that of royal trips. The power of shamans as royal proxies taking advantage of the support of the most influential family in the nation overwhelmed high officials. After byeolgeun was abolished in the 16th century, shamans' ritualistic authority gradually diminished; however, the family rituals developed during the Neo-Confucian revival. In this regard, the demand for family rites was increasing and the rites became settled as convention in the Joseon period [14]. Giwuje (祈雨祭, rainmaking ritual), rainmaking rituals performed during a drought have a long history, as mentioned in *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋, 722-479 BCE) and *The Commentary of Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (左傳). During the rituals, shamans and crippled people were often sacrificed to death by fire. In China, according to *The Rites of Zhou* (周禮), female shamans become perishable when nature does not keep the regularity of the rites, or when a natural catastrophe that can be considered as an aperiodicity occurs. Female shamans were not only linked with this omen and death in the course of their regular duties, but the poor women were forced to face nature at its abysmal state [15].

The shamans in the Joseon Dynasty, akin to the brahmins of India or Egyptian officiating priests, were presiders over comprehensive rituals including ancestral rites or prayers. Their main roles were to heal the sick and perform rituals. In the traditional agricultural societies of the Joseon period, shamans frequently performed activities for rain by praying toward the heavens in hopes of resolving severe droughts. The shamans in the Joseon period were not forcefully demanded to sacrifice themselves (unlike the ancient Chinese shamans); yet they were asked to play a key role in presiding over rain-making rituals. When detecting a danger of drought, the government implemented policies to ban drinking and reduce the number of side dishes set before a king. The liquor prohibition law generally became effective nationwide. This implies that a king and the entire country cordially responded to a heavenly punishment and at the same time, by banning drinking wine, which may require plenty of rice to brew, prevented a waste of food provisions and thereby coped with the disaster. In the royal palace, music was not allowed to be played. The markets, symbols of noise, were either transferred or demanded to be open only in the north.

There is a view that the griefs of people harmed Fire to cause a drought. For example, excessive taxes or impellent statutory labor could be a culprit of imbuelement of the grieves. Due to this, during times of severe droughts, a king had resolved conflict fast and reduced punishments to keep the number of falsely charged people from increasing. Also, policies for widows, widowers, orphans, or ones without their descendent were devised to free them from resentment. This kind of efforts led to a role of redeeming people and taking care of their lives amid extreme circumstances. However, if a drought continued, the rain-making ritual was performed to pray directly to the heavens. The rain-making ritual generally took place at the Royal Ancestral Shrine and the royal altar. If rain did not occur, an altar where prayer could be offered for rainfall was prepared. Each province was ordered to hold the rain-making ritual at the sites of splendid mountains and rivers [14].

3.6. Disease Cure

Living a healthy and long life is an instinctive desire of humanity through all ages. In Jeju Island, there is a view wherein a human can be overtaken with sickness when one's soul becomes separated from one's body [16]. Nevertheless, folk beliefs including shamanism seek out the reason for diseases from the exterior body. For instance, demons, bad pneuma, impurity, or wicked spirits may influence the occurrence of human diseases or distort the harmony between nature and heaven and earth. In addition, shamanism insists that human transgressions may trigger the rages and punishments of gods or ancestors, leading to outbreaks [17].

In this regard, because shamanism has sought the reason for diseases in the relationships among human beings, or between human and gods, it lays more stress on social, incantatory aspects, rather than the medical aspect. Accordingly, shamanism has also influenced preventive incantatory activities to get rid of possible causes for diseases along with treatments after diseases occurred. Practices that still exist today, such as eating chicken stew with ginseng during summer or nuts on the fifteenth of January, are customs for the prevention of diseases.

The process for the treatment of diseases may include rituals to guide the spirits of the dead to heaven, such as ssitgim-gut (impurity-washing ritual) or jinogi-gut (guiding-the-dead ritual). However, for the prevention of a minor disease, salpuri (evil-spirit-washing ritual) or pudakgeori (chasing away of evil spirits) were performed while serious diseases were required to perform gwangin-gut (mental-illness healing ritual), mamabaesong-gut (bidding farewell to the god of smallpox ritual), or wuhwan-gut (illness-healing ritual). These guts for treatments were conducted in different ways throughout the provinces. In addition, there was a treatment using a talisman. A shaman would make a talisman using cinnabar powder, setting the date and time to release the malignant spirit of the patient. Henceforth, the patient is demanded to eat the ashes of the talisman or keep it [14].

Gut is not just performed to cure the patients of diseases. According to A. Yi, an idiomatic expression, 'gut handa (performing gut)', has vastly pervaded Korean tradition. For example, a tug-of-war or stepped mini-terrace straw works used to be called 'maeul-gut' (village-gut) or 'nori-gut' (play-gut). In the climax, the gut became a pleasurable party in which every participant hung out with each another, spicing up the situation. Gut implies all the comprehensive essence of social gatherings, discourse, or activity in Korean people's lives [18]. The interesting point is that gut is not precisely a means of treatment or prayer for heavenly blessings; it is also a uniquely spiritual capacity of Korean's han (unresolved resentment). Gut like salpuri is deeply interrelated with Korean's han. Shamans were the pacification of the vengeful spirits of people. This represents the shaman's role as a han resolver [19].

3.7. Divination or Fortune-telling

Divination is a shaman's intrinsic territory that should not be dismissed only as a bluff or a fraud. In many cases, shamans utilize the considerable amount of information a person stores in his or her subconscious. They are well-versed with using means and methods to reach the state where the spirits helped them recall such hidden memory. Divination is one of the most important functions of a shaman. This activity is not like gut because no music is performed; it is akin to advising for clients. Usually the gosa (sacrificial rite for gods) or gut is the result of the advising that happens during divination. The clients pay the shaman a fee for the advising (bokchae).

This kind of meeting is often very private because the clients usually go to shamans when they have secret or personal problems. The questions are very personal such as, "When can I get married? Where shall we move to? Should I keep dating with this man? Am I able to pass this year's state-exam?" and so on. In divination, many shamanic instruments were used. In the ancient Mayan period, some parts of the peninsular divination were called joots'ik cuenta, "extract an account," or "draw

out a reading.” Mayan shamans accomplished this with corn kernels, *sáastuno’ob*, and with other revered objects [20].

In the West, shamans visualize the images reflected on a crystal ball or read the movements of the constellations, while African shamans utilize psychoactive plants or even use leaves, stones, or rocks to tell fortunes [21]. The shamans in the Joseon era scattered rice to interpret its shape, shook a bell, or opened a fan. They also told fortunes, riddling out their dreams, or read the movement of stars or the moon as well as the changes in weather. These methods have been transmitted even up to now. During divination, three coins are taken out and thrown to determine fortune or misfortune based on the side that appears. Sacred swords are thrown onto the ground. When they all fall pointing in the same direction, it implies good fortune [22].

4. Conclusion

The tendency to condemn shamanism grew rapidly after the establishment of the Joseon Dynasty in 1392, which made Confucianism the national philosophy for management of the country. The aristocrats in the upper class, who cultivated their knowledge in China and became enthusiastic cohorts of China-centrism, despised shamanism, an arena of Korean religiosity, without proper understanding, and forced the government to abolish the tradition and degraded shamans to the lowest classes so that they could not even be treated as common people. This process was constantly carried out during the Joseon Dynasty. The Confucian literati who possessed a strong will to modernize society from the period of the falling Joseon regarded shamanism as a culturally crucial trait of pre-modernity and asserted entirely on rooting it out. Shamanism was more severely repressed during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945 CE) by the authorities who would try to eliminate the Korean identity, because it was regarded as a very indigenous religion. The colonial politicians and the Japanese folklorists perceived shamanism as an uncivilized custom or even a superstition. Such a view appeared also among the American missionaries who came to Korea during the end of the Joseon era. They regarded the shamanic rituals and ancestral rites as superstition and tried to make people convert from this deep-rooted tradition to the completely new religion, Christianity. The negative perspective on shamanism as superstition or pre-modern legacy has been transmitted among the Korean elite up to now [23].

Despite these facts, and the many countermeasures to ban shamanism, its tenacious vitality has lasted, and it has been widely accommodating of Buddhism, Daoism, Totemism, Animism, and even their deities or rituals. Shamanism has not only been rooted in Buddhist culture or rituals but has also been very beneficial in explaining coping mechanisms for tough situations like droughts or wars. Some similar theories including the theory of resonance between Heaven and human beings, or disaster prevention existed to resolve rough times, but these dynamic and moralistic theories were insufficient to give answers to the various and concrete problems in life [24]. As regards coming into the contemporary period, Korean society still perceives the religious dimension of shamanism negatively, yet its cultural side has become a crucial archetype [25]. Many regions have strived to develop shamanic cultural relics within the regions and preserve its regional identity by promoting the place image as a sacred space. If the shamanism embedded in different regions becomes well-known, people today will understand shamanic culture through a new perspective that will shed new light on it.

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