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The South Korean Governments' Policy towards Shamanism – Musok

Korean shamanism, called *musok*, is one of the oldest systems of beliefs that has existed on the Korean Peninsula. It shows very exceptionally specific features. It differs from other shamanic beliefs because it is monopolized by women and it is still a living thing in a modern world, which is based on rationality or logical thinking. Moreover, it has never been accepted as an official religion and supported by the Korean ruling class and elites of society.

The origins of Korean shamanism are hard to determine. There is no doubt that archaic beliefs and cults in this region originated from animistic traditions, which were remarkably popular in the whole Northeast Asia. The contemporary tribes treated nature and its forces as extraordinary and magical. There was a common belief that all unusual phenomena were full of gods or demons. Additionally, folks believed that every single thing, even a small one, was inhabited by higher spirits, which were suspected of perpetual correlation with souls of living and dead beings. Moreover, the native people worshiped gods of mountains, rivers, rocks or plants and believed they had a powerful impact on the lives of human beings. If man treated gods well and remembered about them, they would gain their support and approval. Consequently, gods were believed to help them reach happiness and fortune.

First written records about any beliefs on the Korean Peninsula are in the Chinese text *Wei Chi*, which was composed in the 3rd Century A.D. Other records are the Korean texts *Samguk Yusa* and *Samguk Sagi*. According to them, Koreans worshiped a God in Heaven, called Hananim. In religious ceremonies they prayed to him for good fortune, happiness and health. They believed it was the Supreme Being who ruled over the entire world. These texts also inform about first rulers who were simultaneously shamans.

Further information about ancient beliefs is in myths and legends. One of these is the Myth of Tangun, the progenitor of Korean people. It is the most significant foundation myth and refers to the god and the faith in his coming from heaven to earth that results in the union of heaven, earth and creation. According to it, Hwanung, son of Hwanin (Hananim), wished to descend from heaven and live on earth among human beings. At that time, a she-bear and a tigress prayed to him to transform them into human beings. The god gave them sacred herbs to

eat and informed to stay in a cave for one hundred days and avoid the sunlight. After twenty-one days the she-bear became a woman, but the tigress did not follow the guidance and remained a tiger. The bear woman was unable to find a husband, so she prayed to Hwanung once again for a child. The god metamorphosed himself and married her. The woman became the goddess mother of the earth. Through the union of the heavenly god and the human being, a new life was created. They had a son called Tangun Wanggeom, who founded the first Korean kingdom in 2333 B.C.

Korean shamanism understands the world not through any natural phenomena, which could be explained scientifically, but believes that the supernatural powers control the world. However, it does not have any generalized scriptures, fixed religious dogma or a unified organization of priests. It is a natural system of beliefs, and it was able to spread deep roots in the Koreans' daily life. Shamanism as a religion performs a very practical function in human's life. People naturally avoid any misfortune and pursue happiness in their lives. This system of beliefs provides peace and happiness between men and the world, where they live. In other words, shamanism provides harmony – the order that is preserved between all existing things. Moreover, harmony is an ideal goal no matter for whom, where and when. It is an aim for everyone, at any time and in every place. However, the ideal state can only be attained when one remains open-minded and tolerant and religious barriers or canons are crossed. Therefore, harmony is the best embodiment of the ideal life. In addition, Korean shamanism does not focus on providing people the life after death or the redemption of a soul. Furthermore, Koreans are very practical in their religious life because they frequently perceive any religion through fortune or misfortune, which may be brought upon them. Such religious thinking is deeply influenced by shamanic concepts. To prove this theory, it should be stressed that Korean shamanism concentrates mainly on how one person or/and their family can achieve intangible assets and material benefits in this world by paying tribute to gods rather than putting emphasis on universal virtues like wisdom, justice, freedom, immortality, mercy or love.

It should be mentioned that Korean shamanism may be the best example of an unorganized religion with not well-organized canons and practices. But it possesses features of a well-formulated system of moral values, conduct, behaviors and beliefs. In other words, it plays an important function in Korean society because it is the system of proper values, emotions, morals and manners.

Any man may learn and experience how to be open-minded and tolerant by observing rules of the Korean native religion. In this case, attention should be payed to innumerable gods worshiped in Korean shamanism. If there is a strong need, some of gods may be easily added

or removed. Such situations may occur during the wake of social transformations. It should be added that this folk religion does not treat its own gods in a preferential or superior way. Additionally, this phenomenon does not allow to treat non-shamanic and other gods in an inferior way. However, highly debatable is the following comment that all gods are perceived as equal and there is no hierarchy among them that functions in the Korean native religion. What is extraordinarily important is the function of gods in a socio-cultural zone and their responsibility for some part of a human life. In brief, what they can do for people to help them achieve fortune and avoid misfortune.

In Korea, shamans, called *mudang*, are mostly women. Generally, they may be divided into two categories – the northern type and the southern type. The first type is called *gangsinmu* that is to say a charismatic shaman who is possessed by a god or a spirit. Therefore, to become *gangsinmu* one must experience a shamanic sickness. This mysterious, unexplained, incurable illness leads to a great physical and psychological suffering. There is no scientific explanation what causes this mental-exhausting disease. Simultaneously, the possessed human being often dreams of gods, experiences illusions and hallucinations during day and night. There is only one possible way to overcome the sickness. The haunted person must accept their fate and become a shaman. Since that moment the shaman has supernatural powers and can perform their duties as a medium between the world of spirits and the world of people. However, if a possessed person does not accept their fate and the spirit and refuses the gift of becoming the medium, the sickness is not only incurable but there is a risk it may affect their beloved family members and even lead to their death. The illness is a sign from a higher being because it chooses a person and becomes their guardian spirit.

The second type is called *sesummu*, that is a hereditary shaman, usually practiced by women. This is a profession so it means that this sort of the shaman does not experience the ecstasy through conducting a shamanic ritual.

The *kut* ceremony is the most important aspect of Korean shamanism. It is a series of large rituals, consisting of several parts or scenes and it is performed for a specific purpose – to restore or/and maintain harmony in the universe. This shamanic ceremony itself plays a significant function in Korean society. It is the crucial element that unites people together. During the ritual all family members or members of a community (e.g. village) gather to pacify the gods. Moreover, the *kut* ceremony preserves the Korean traditional values.

There is a distinction between central cults/religions, which are dominated by males, and peripheral cults/religions, led and followed by the oppressed people, usually women. This

hypothesis – that the same cult can change from one to the other according to cultural, economic, political and social circumstances can definitely be applied to Korean shamanism.

Various historical documents contain information that ancient Korean shamans were mostly men who conducted rituals and had political and social power. The degeneration of shamanism from a central cult to a cult of women and oppressed people is generally believed to have begun with the introduction of Buddhism from China in the 4th Century A.D. Although Buddhism was adopted officially as the central morality religion, shamanism survived alongside it. Shamanic-Buddhist syncretism is manifested in various shamanic practices e.g. Buddhist gods were introduced into the shamanic *kut* ceremony and Buddhism embraced some of the shamanic gods such as *Samseong*. Nowadays, the shrines dedicated to them exist in almost all the Buddhist temples in South Korea.

However, during the Joseon period and the adoption of Confucianism as the national guiding ideology in politics, religion and socio-cultural areas initiated the full-scale suppression of shamanism. All Korean shamans were cast into the lowest classes of Korean society and shamanism was treated as a vulgar and trivial phenomenon. As a result, it was considered to be suitable only for women and people of the lowest classes of society. Since then, it had to function on the margins of Korean society. Moreover, *mudang* had to pay special taxes, which were provided to discourage their practices. However, shamanism continued to survive among the lowest masses of Korean society and provided women a release-like form from oppressive patriarchy and social hierarchy.

When Korea unwillingly opened up to foreign influence at the end of 19th Century, little changed in this respect. During that time Confucianism, the national ideology, lost its influence due to modernization ideas i.e. political and social reforms. Furthermore, the Western missionaries criticized heavily all *mudang* and their practices. They deemed shamanism as a superstition and tried to mobilize public opinion through newspapers to join in the battle against shamanism, its practitioners and believers.

The situation changed a little after the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910. However, Japanese did not regard shamanic cults as of any use, actually, they were considered as a great hindrance to the development of the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, Japanese rulers were more prone to promoting Buddhism and Shintō as a linking factors between both countries. Japanese occupants considered Korean shamanism as a naïve and conservative system of beliefs. According to them, it hindered social progress in three areas: the development of modern healthcare – Koreans relied on shaman's prayers than doctor's knowledge; the development of

the spirit of self-reliance – people had non-scientific attitude; and economic well-being – shamans were accused of economically exploiting uneducated, naïve and poor people.

Moreover, during the Japanese rule on the Korean Peninsula, the government defined religions into two types: sanctioned religions and quasi-religions. First group included Shintō, Buddhism and Christianity. Second consisted of other classified as quasi-religious systems or organizations which were similar to religions. According to this division, religions from the second group, including shamanism, fortune-telling or any other folk religions, were under the control of the colonial police. Additionally, the control was justified by applying the Regulations on Police Offenses of 1912. Due to it quasi-religions were suppressed and any violation of these laws resulted in holding people in police custody or they were heavily fined for practicing them.

After liberation from Japan the situation did not change. Prejudice against Korean shamans and their practices remained strongly and the police often interfered with their ceremonies. Liberation did not bring much relief to shamanism, which still was by many regarded as a superstition, vulgar and something shameful which had to be hidden from foreigners.

Korean shamanism has been a matter of concern to the South Korean government for many years. On one hand this concern has been negative, but on the other hand there have been positive perceptions to this indigenous Korean religion. Especially, during the authoritarian regimes there was a strong negative attitude to it.

In the 1970s the president Park Chung-hee initiated the *Saemaeul Undong* – the New Community Movement which was a mass mobilization and development movement intended to transform, modernize and improve villages and rural society in the Republic of Korea. The New Community Movement had to accelerate the development of rural areas and reduce the discrepancies between city and village via socio-economic transformation. Within the new national reform started again the *Misin Tapa Undong* – the Anti-Superstition Movement. During it the police and local religious and socio-cultural leaders persecuted and suppressed shamanic cults. Many indigenous cults i.e. shamanic shrines were burned down, shamans were arrested and sacred trees and the *jangseung* – totem pole-like guardians were physically destroyed. Obviously, shamanism was deemed irrational and a hindrance to rationality and the modernization. Moreover, all these acts were unofficially encouraged by the Park's regime.

However, in 1962, the South Korean government established the cultural protection policy by enacting the Act of Cultural Protection Property. Under this law shamanism is authorized as important tangible and intangible cultural properties. Also, its performers i.e. shamans are designated as the Living National Treasures.

Moreover, the mentioned policy has as its objective to conserve, protect and preserve traditional and/or indigenous aspects of Korean culture, tradition and values. It is worth noticing that tangible culture exists in a physical form that may remain for centuries e.g. pottery, tools, music instruments or clothes. The problem is with intangible culture because its cultural items are often closely connected to the performances by human beings e.g. religious rituals, dances, playing music or acting. It means that they do not exist in a physical form, they are not touchable. In other words, intangible cultural items are hard to preserve and conserve as a communicative process.

Furthermore, intangible cultural properties i.e. shamanism and their customs can be used politically. The South Korean government has used its own cultural properties to express the uniqueness of Korea. Due to it, shamanism has become a national and cultural symbol associated with the Korean national identity, nationalism and the origins of Korean people. This discourse has also allowed to link this folk religion to the Koreanness.

The main hypothesis of my dissertation is that Korean shamanism gained legal and social legitimization after political transformation in South Korea. During the authoritarian rules of Rhee Syng-man, Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan shamanism was considered as a hindrance to modernization in all fields – religion, social, culture and tradition; and to the state and its inhabitants. It was viewed as a superstition. Moreover, it was categorized as an irrational and illogical thing that should have been finally eradicated. That is why the contemporary governments pursued the policy of suppressing Korean shamans and believers of this folk religion. However, during pro-democratic protests in 1980s, protesters used components of this native Korean religion and connected them with democratic values. Even members of political parties used elements of Korean shamanism in their political campaigns. In my opinion, this was the change of attitude towards this folk religion. After political turmoil it was acknowledged as a significant part of Korean culture, religion, tradition and values. Since that time, shamanism has been playing crucial role in Korean society and has been having impact on political sphere and single politicians. Moreover, after political transformation it was legalized as an official religion in South Korea.

The main purpose of this doctoral dissertation is to present the evolution of the South Korean government attitude to shamanism and show the phenomena of using it as a political strategy.

The dissertation is composed of six chapters. In Chapter One I define what is religion, folklore, folk culture and describe their relations with politics. In South Korea shamanism functions in two spheres – religion and folklore. That is why I have to describe these

phenomena. Furthermore, this is a theoretical chapter and matters that are dealt with here help understand the governments policy towards Korean indigenous religion.

Chapter Two describes ideology and structure of Korean shamanism. It also provides information about other states of consciousness that shamans use to contact with gods and describes shamanic pantheon. This chapter helps understand why shamanism in Korea has been regarded a superstition.

In Chapter Three I describe a religious structure in South Korea. Furthermore, I provide information about Korean shamans and the most important shamanic ceremony in this folk religion – *kut*. I also try to show the rightful place of shamanism in Korea – is it a true religion or just a folk religion.

Chapter Four describes the history of Korean shamanism. In ancient times it was a central religion, dominated by men, then it was marginalized and changed its status to peripheral cult. This chapter provides information about shamanism during the Japanese occupation period (1910-1945). Moreover, the information provided here help understand why the authoritarian regimes established negative policy against this folk religion.

Chapter Five presents the information about the attitude of authoritarian regimes towards shamanism. On one hand, it was considered as a primitive thing, destined to extermination, but on the second hand, it was used as a political tool to rebuild and re-create Korean national identity and culture.

Chapter Six describes shamanism during the time of political turmoil in South Korea. It shows that this natural religion is highly adaptable phenomenon and can be used to express political attitude against political regime and the ruling class. In that period shamanism was connected with democratic values. Furthermore, this chapter presents the more positive policy towards this folk religion. The government established the new policy towards it which enables to use shamanism for promoting and political propaganda purposes. Thanks to it this native religion is regarded as an important part of Korean culture, tradition and values.

I chose a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach to investigate the research project. In my opinion these methods enable to determine to what extent there is a relationship between further variables: the South Korean government, Korean shamanism and South Korean people. Furthermore, these methods enable to determine to what extent one variable influences another. To write the dissertation I chose the following techniques to record needed knowledge: making observations of shamans not only during shamanic ceremonies; making a survey research among South Koreans about their perception of Korean shamanism, the government and the relation between them; making interviews with Korean shamans; making interviews

with experts in the field of Anthropology, Sociology, Folklore and Religious Studies, Ethnomusicology, History and Political Studies. I also used wide literature about Korean shamanism.

The combination of these methods helps properly analyze the overall picture of shamans and their status, religious and folklore areas, shamanic ceremonies, status of shamanism in modern times and shamanic tradition in South Korea and the whole Korean Peninsula.

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