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Contents

ARTICLES:

- MONIKA ARNOŠTOVÁ, Chinese overtime culture among white-collar workers in the first-tier cities..... 7
- LECH BUCZEK, Political and Strategic Dimensions of the Relations between the EU and South Korea..... 29
- DOUGLAS GABRIEL, Pioneers of the Times: North Korea's Claim to Contemporaneity circa 1989..... 44
- ROMAN HUSARSKI, Buddhist Nationalism and Islam in Modern Myanmar 66
- NATALIA KIM, Feminism and nationalism in South Korea: empowering Korean women during the nation-building process 84
- EMESE KOVACS, Mea culpa phenomenon: Comparative study of apologies in the Japanese, American and Hungarian Media 102
- EKATERINA LEVCHENKO, Rhetorical Devices in Old Japanese Verse: Structural Analysis and Semantics. Part II: From Semantics to Hermeneutics 119
- MICHAŁ LUBINA, In Search of Prestige and a Lost Position: Russia's Policy in the Korean Policy 138
- DOMINIK WRÓBLEWSKI, Korean Shamanism – the Religion of Harmony in Contemporary Korea 157

BOOK REVIEW:

- Lee Ahlam. North Korean Defectors in a New and Competitive Society, London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2016, 159 pages. ISBN: 978-0739192665 – rev. Nicolas Levi174
- Kim Yong. With Kim Suk-Young. Long Road Home: Testimony of a North Korean Camp Survivor, New York City: Columbia University Press, 2009, 168 pages. ISBN: 978-0-231-147447 – rev. Nicolas Levi177
- Editorial principles180

Korean Shamanism – the Religion of Harmony in Contemporary Korea

Abstract

Shamanism is one of the oldest religions that have existed on the Korean Peninsula. This system of belief, which is called Muism, provides a well-organised structure of the universe. Furthermore, it can be considered as a source of good values and emotions. It focuses on striving to achieve harmony and unity between man and the world around him. Moreover, it is monopolised by women and the kut ceremony has a significant value. The aim of the article is to explain these values and show how Korean shamanism is perceived today. The publication analyses the ideology, rules and features of Muism.

Key words: *Muism, mudang, kut, gangshinmu, sesummu.*

Introduction

Shamanistic beliefs are the oldest religions that have existed on every continent. However, Korean shamanism, called *Musok* or *Muism*, shows very exceptionally specific features. It differs from other shamanistic religions because it is monopolised by women. Additionally, *Muism* has never been accepted as an official religion and supported by the Korean ruling class and the elites of society. It was made to function only at the margin of the Korean culture and society. One of the main reasons why *Muism* has been playing a marginal role and became the religion of women is due to Confucianism. In the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897) Confucian ideas had a remarkable impact on Korean culture, beliefs, political views and society. Krzysztof Gawlikowski has argued that the Confucian doctrine which helps sustain a patriarchal society, which means there must be gender segregation in the household, for example. This was even extended to religious ceremonies and rituals for the gods

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and higher spirits¹. Confucianism helped men satisfy their religious needs, but it also helped to completely exclude women from it. As a result, they needed to find a religion for themselves. Therefore, the Korean ruling class and elites of society treated the worshipped gods and a shamanistic *kut* ceremony as vulgar, trivial and suitable only for women and people of the lower classes of society. It should be mentioned that the *kut* ceremony consists mostly of singing and dancing moves. During the ritual, the shaman experiences an ecstasy through dancing vigorously, then reaches a trance-like state. Such religious activity was considered extremely inappropriate for men².

According to the division of the Korean Peninsula into two opposing countries, the publication describes *Muism* only in South Korea (hereafter Korea), except fragments discussing historical times before 1945.

Shamanism and the Shaman

Shamanistic beliefs are probably the world's oldest forms of religion, their origins are deeply rooted in myth, spirituality and are strictly connected with nature and its forces. In shamanism, the world is full of spirits, i.e. demons, gods, souls of the dead, which affect directly and indirectly all living beings. They play an important function and exist both in individual and collective lives.

The term shamanism is based on the word 'shaman', which comes from the Tungusic *saman*. It refers to a religious practitioner who is a person with extraordinary spiritual powers, which enable them to intermediate between the worlds of living beings and spirits³.

Hogarth Kim Hyun-key maintains that shamanism was once considered as would any other primitive religion. Today, many scholars agree that this term is notoriously difficult to define and there are many definitions dealing with the issue. Besides, the theoretical debate about the nature of shamanism has been going on but there is no consensus

¹ Krzysztof Gawlikowski, *Konfucjański model państwa w Chinach* [The Confucian State Model in China], Warszawa: ISP PAN, 2009, pp. 79-80.

² Oh Kyong-geun, 'Korean Shamanism – the Religion of Women', *International Journal of Korean Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2016, pp. 79-81.

³ Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, London: Kegan Paul, 1935, p. 268.

about it⁴. Consequently, there are many definitions and descriptions of the shaman⁵.

Piers Vitebsky suggests that shamanism is not a religion, but a cross-cultural form of religious sensibility and practices⁶. Pieter F. Craffert adds that an individual being cannot belong to shamanism, but can take part in or benefit from this form of religion and its activities. Moreover, in some circumstances a person can become a shaman themselves through religious tradition or a particular cultural event.

According to P. F. Craffert, shamanism is a globally distributed and very ancient form of activities based on the human potential for experiencing shamanic states of consciousness⁷. Thus, Ake Hultkrantz indicates the term 'shaman' should be considered as a complex of beliefs and practices that revolves around a religious practitioner who uses it to achieve an alternate state of consciousness⁸.

Hogarth Kim Hyun-key argues that shamanism is best defined in terms of who and what the shaman is. All religious specialists have been known as mediums, fortune-tellers, magicians, exorcists, oracles, rainmakers or witch-doctors, just to name a few. They are capable of having direct contact with the higher spirits from the other world, controlling them and using their supernatural powers to help other people who suffer⁹.

Mircea Eliade describes the shaman as a 'psychopomp' who may also be a priest, a mystic and a poet as well as a magician and a medicine man. They are believed to cure, like all doctors, and to perform miracles, like all magicians. Such people are great masters of ecstasy. Shamanism is then a technique of ecstasy¹⁰.

Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff notes that the shaman is an important element of the 'psychomental complex' of his or her society, and helps to solve sickness, stress and danger¹¹.

⁴ Hogarth Kim Hyun-key, *Korean Shamanism and Cultural Nationalism*, Seoul: Jimoondang Pub. Co., 1999, pp. 7-10.

⁵ P. F. Craffert, 'Shamanism and the Shamanic Complex', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2011, p. 60.

⁶ Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman*, Boston: Duncan Baird, 1995, p. 11.

⁷ Craffert, 'Shamanism...', p. 59.

⁸ A. Hultkrantz, 'A Definition of Shamanism', *Temenos*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1973, p. 36.

⁹ Hogarth Kim Hyun-key, *Korean Shamanism and....*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964, p. 4.

¹¹ Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex....*, p. 268.

A. Hultkrantz defines the shaman as a professional and inspired intermediary who establishes a means of contact with a supernatural world through his ecstatic experience. He also receives his inspiration from his guardian or helping spirits¹².

According to Ioan Myrddin Lewis's definition, the shaman is a person of either gender who has mastered spirits and who can at will introduce them into his own body¹³.

Despite the various definitions and descriptions of the shaman and shamanism, all scholars seem to agree about the most important features of the above-mentioned concepts. The most fundamental one is the shaman is capable of meditating between the worlds. To achieve this, they have to experience ecstasy, then reach a trance-like state. Another significant factor is that they are able to transcend the human condition and pass freely back and forth through different cosmological planets¹⁴. During the journey, the shaman is allowed to identify the true nature or essence of phenomena, to understand how this is implicated in the causation of events in this world and to act upon this understanding in order to change undesirable situations and sustain desirable ones¹⁵.

Shamans help people to gain the sympathy, approval and support of the gods. Their main function is to cure others of mental and physical diseases. They are also advisers and make use of their abilities to see into the past, the present and to foresee into the future. Moreover, shamans are representatives of tradition and culture. All shamanistic rituals reflect the customs and ethos of the society in which they occur. Hence, they preserve old customs and oral traditions, which are often lost in the passage of time¹⁶.

So, the shaman is a person of supernatural powers and incredibly strong will, who is able to intermediate between the realms of human beings and spirits. To achieve their goal, they have to experience ecstasy and a state of trance. Thanks to their uncanny powers, they are capable of

¹² Ake Hultkrantz, *Shamanic Healing and Ritual Drama*, New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1996, p. 4.

¹³ Ioan Myrddin Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 45.

¹⁴ Peter Furst, 'To Find Our Life: Peyote among the Huichol Indians of Mexico', in *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, Peter Furst (ed.), New York: Praeger, 1972, pp. 136-160.

¹⁵ P. Vitebsky, 'Shamanism', in *Indigenous Religions: A Comparison*, Graham Harvey (ed.), London and New York: Cassell, 2000, p. 57.

¹⁶ Hogarth Kim Hyun-key, *Korean Shamanism and....*, pp. 12-13.

perceiving the true nature of phenomena to better understand how it dictates the causality of events and act upon it to uphold the world order.

Archaic Beliefs on the Korean Peninsula and the Myth of Tan'gun

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 of 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, people believed that every single thing, even the smallest, was inhabited by higher spirits, which were suspected of perpetual correlation with the souls of living and dead beings. Moreover, the native people worshipped gods of mountains, rivers, rocks or plants and believed they had a powerful impact on the lives of human beings¹⁷. If man treated the gods well and remembered about them, they would gain their support and approval. Consequently, the gods were believed to help them reach happiness and good fortune.

First written records about any beliefs on the Korean Peninsula are in the Chinese text *Wei Chi*, which was composed in the Third Century¹⁸. Other records are the Korean texts *Samguk Yusa* and *Samguk Sagi*¹⁹. According to them, Koreans worshipped a God in Heaven, called Hananim. In the religious ceremonies performed in Spring and Autumn, 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 tell us about the first rulers, who were simultaneously shamans.

Further information about ancient beliefs is found in myths and legends. One of these is the Myth of Tan'gun, the progenitor of the 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 told them to stay in a cave for one hundred days and avoid the

¹⁷ Halina Ogarek-Czój, *Mitologia Korei* [Korean Mythology], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1988, pp. 22-24, 30, 33.

¹⁸ Ryu Tong-shik, 'Shamanism: The Dominant Folk Religion in Korea', *Inter-Religio*, Vol. 5, No. 5, Spring 1984, p. 8.

¹⁹ Halina Ogarek-Czój, *Mitologia...*, p. 22.

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 Tan'gun Wanggeom, who founded the first Korean kingdom in 2333 B.C.²⁰.

Ryu Tong-shik argues it is necessary to investigate the rituals of the ancient Korean people to better understand their beliefs. They may be divided into three sections. The first group is related to the sacrificial offering ceremonies and the belief in the light, which symbolises Hananim. The second one is connected with agriculture and the belief in grain goddess. The last section concerns the belief of creation and deals with exorcisms. At all these events, the ancient Koreans sang and danced with eating and drinking for many days and nights. Through these activities they could experience a group ecstasy, then a union with the gods²¹. So, it is seen that the songs and dance played a significant role and were the main elements in primitive Korean culture.

Korean Shamanism – *Muism*

Oh Kyong-geun assumes that *Muism* understands the world not through any natural phenomena, which could be explained scientifically, but believes that the supernatural powers control the world. According to Oh, Koreans used such shamanistic ways of thinking for thousands of years. However, he stresses that their social lives strictly follow Confucian values, while their mentality is still deeply rooted in shamanistic ideas of the world²². Lee Gyu-tae follows Oh's suspicions. He says the system of thought/philosophy of Koreans was seriously influenced by Buddhism during the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), by Confucianism during the Joseon dynasty and by rational and scientific thinking in modern times. But shamanistic ideas did not disappear. They

²⁰ Ryu Tong-shik, *The History and Structure of Korean Shamanism*, Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2012, p. 35.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-78.

²² Oh Kyong-geun, 'Korean Shamanism – the Religion...', pp. 79-81.

are just deeply permeated in Korean minds and have remarkable impact on and exert influence on their lives still²³.

Choi Joon-sik compares *Muism* to universal religions like Christianity or Islam. In his views, Korean shamanism does not have any generalised scriptures, fixed religious dogma or a unified organisation of priests. It is a natural system of beliefs, and it was able to spread deep roots in Koreans' daily life. Choi claims that shamanism as a religion performs a very practical function in human life. People naturally avoid any misfortune and pursue happiness in their lives. *Muism* provides peace and happiness between men and the world, where they live²⁴. 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. Choi Joon-sik says Korean shamanism does not focus on providing people with life after death or redemption of the soul. Furthermore, he argues that Koreans are very practical in their religious life because they frequently perceive any religion in terms of fortune or misfortune, which may be brought upon them. Such religious thinking is deeply influenced by shamanic concepts. To illustrate this theory, it should be stressed that *Muism* concentrates mainly on how one person or/and their family can achieve intangible assets and material benefits in this world by paying tribute to the gods rather than putting emphasis on universal virtues like wisdom, justice, freedom, immortality, mercy or love²⁵.

It should be mentioned that Korean shamanism may be the best example of an unorganised religion with not well-organised canons and practices. But it possesses features of a well-formulated system of moral values, conduct, behaviour and beliefs²⁶. In other words, *Muism* plays an

²³ Lee Gyu-tae, 한국인의 샤머니즘 [Korean Shamanism], Seoul: Sinwon-munhwasa, 2000, p. 5.

²⁴ Choi Joon-sik, 무교: 권력에 밀린 한국인의 근본 신앙 [Shamanism – the Fundamental Beliefs of Koreans Rejected by Political Power], Seoul: Mosineun-saramdeul, 2009, pp. 176-177.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 179.

²⁶ Oh Kyong-geun, 'Korean Shamanism – Religion of Reconciliation and Coexistence', *Investigationes Linguisticae*, Vol. 31, No. 31, 2014, p. 36.

important function in Korean society because it is a system of proper values, emotions, morals and manners.

According to Yun I-heum, any man may learn and experience how to be open-minded and tolerant by observing the rules of the native Korean religion. In this case, he pays attention to the innumerable gods worshipped in *Muism* and explains that if there is a strong need, some of the gods may be easily added or removed. Such situations may occur during social transformations. It should be added that *Muism* does not treat its own gods in a preferential or superior way. Additionally, this phenomenon does not allow one to treat non-shamanic and other gods in an inferior way. In fact, all gods are perceived as equal and there is no hierarchy among them that functions in *Muism*. Extraordinarily important is the function of the gods in the socio-cultural sphere and their responsibility for some part of human life. In brief, what it is that they can do for people to help them achieve fortune and avoid misfortune²⁷.

Hogarth Kim Hyun-key suggests that various elements and phenomena of nature appear as gods, as well as kings from past dynasties and many cultural heroes in Korean, and less frequently Chinese, history. As well as the indigenous Korean deities and saints, those from other religions, particularly Buddhism, often find their way into the shamanistic pantheon. Some female deities, like certain wives of the kings and culture heroes and those who are believed to be responsible for bringing a particular disease or for birth also feature strongly. He may conclude that a god is freely invented as the need arises²⁸.

Oh Kyong-geun suggests that if each of the numerous gods performs its function, the order may be preserved not only in the world but also in the whole universe. However, the problem arises when the gods do not obey the rules and interfere with the functions of other gods. Then, the order is destroyed. In other words, each god plays a unique role of upholding the order in the world and even the universe by fulfilling its duties. So to speak, in *Muism* there is no need to preserve the hierarchy among gods because each one of them perpetuates its nature, personality and identity that are necessary to preserve the order. So, Korean *Muism* shows equality, harmony, order, tolerance and open-mindedness. These

²⁷ Yun I-heum, *한국인의 종교관 – 한국정신의 맥락과 내용* [Religious Views of Koreans – Context and Content of the Korean Spirit], Seoul: Seoul National University, 2001, p. 164.

²⁸ Hogarth Kim Hyun-key, *Korean Shamanism and....*, p. 125.

features are also strictly connected with open-minded and tolerant Koreans²⁹.

According to Hogarth Kim Hyun-key, deities in *Muism* provide three main functions. Firstly, there is always one god everywhere, which is responsible for every single place in the world. Secondly, deities protect people against misfortune and diseases. They are responsible for healing them when they get sick. In a manner of speaking, they are guardians of human beings. Thirdly, daily life with its all matters, is highly connected with the gods and their activities. That is why people should not forget about the gods and should treat them properly by performing the rituals. Such behaviour succeeds in gaining the gods' sympathy and approval, which results in keeping grudges, misfortune and resentments at bay³⁰. However, it should be noted that the aim of Korean shamanism, or more likely the gods' aim, is to support people and their existence by protecting them against misfortune and bringing them peace, relief, happiness, health and fortune.

Korean Shamans – *Mudang* and their Function

A shaman performs a main function in all animistic beliefs. It is no different in *Muism*, but here women monopolise the religious system³¹. In Korea, shamans, called *mudang* or *mu*, are mostly women. Generally, they may be divided into two categories – the northern type and the southern type.

The first type is called *gangshinmu*, that is to say a charismatic shaman who is possessed by a god or a demon. Therefore, to become *gangshinmu* one must experience a shamanic sickness, called *mubyeong* or *shinbyeong*³².

Choi Gil-seong describes shamanic sickness as a pathological phenomenon. This mysterious, unexplained, incurable illness leads to a great physical and psychological suffering. There is no scientific explanation as to what causes this mental-exhausting disease. Simultaneously, the possessed human being often dreams of gods and demons, experiences illusions and hallucinations during day and night.

²⁹ Oh Kyong-geun, 'Korean Shamanism – Religion of...', p. 37.

³⁰ Hogarth Kim Hyun-key, *Korean Shamanism and...*, pp. 125-146.

³¹ In Korean shamanism there are also male blinded fortune-tellers, called *p'ansu*; Lee Jung-young, *Korean Shamanistic Rituals*, the Hague and New York: Mouton, 1981, p. 4.

³² Choi In-hak, *Korean Shamanism: From Field Notes*, Seoul: The Department of Korean Language and Literature, Myongji University, 1978, pp. 15-16.

What is important here, is that such person does not respond to the medical treatment applied by doctors. There is only one possible way to overcome the sickness. The haunted person must accept their fate and become a shaman. From 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, 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, called *momju*³³. People believe that only *gangshinmu* can experience an ecstasy and reach a trance state through conducting a ritual.

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 a shaman does not experience the ecstasy through conducting shamanistic rituals. This type of *mudang* inherits their profession from one of their parents, or a mother-in-law teaches her daughter-in-law how to perform and conduct shamanistic ceremonies and rituals. Additionally, every man can become *sesummu* but a process of becoming a shaman and its training is really hard and leads to mental and physical exhaustion³⁴.

Oh Kyong-geun claims the shaman is a human being who needs extraordinary power and strength to communicate with gods and demons. These higher spirits are sacred creatures, a sacrum and that is why a person who wants to communicate with them must be blessed. But first, he or she must be an ordinary person who has to purify their soul through suffering excruciating physical and mental pain. All that differentiates the *mudang* from other ordinary people³⁵.

The shaman plays an important function in *Muism*. Firstly, he or she conducts shamanistic ceremonies and rituals that are performed to bring fortune and happiness to ordinary people. Secondly, they are fortune-tellers. Thirdly, the *mudang* lives to support other human beings, which

³³ Choi Gil-seong, '샤머니즘의 비교' [A Comparison of Shamanism], in 비교민속학과 비교문화 [Comparative Folklore and Cross-Culture], Choi In-hak (ed.), Seoul: Minsokwon, 1999, pp. 363-364.

³⁴ Yang Jong-sung, 'Korean Shamanism: The Training Process of Charismatic 'Mudang'', *Folklore Forum*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1988, pp. 21-22.

³⁵ Oh Kyong-geun, 'Korean Shamanism – Religion of...', p. 38.

explains their other function, namely they devote themselves to help other people resolve their truly complicated problems³⁶.

As was mentioned above, Korean shamanism is monopolised by women. But how did it happen? Actually, it is an important question. Above all, the Confucian doctrine plays a key role here, because it strongly emphasises rational behaviour. But *Muism* in its teachings approves supernatural powers and higher spirits, like gods and demons. So it is far from rationality. Moreover, during the Joseon dynasty, the Confucian scholars considered shamanism as a vulgar, coarse, offensive and primitive thing. Therefore, they wanted to get rid of it as quickly as possible. What is more, women have been playing a central role in *Muism* as a whole, especially in its ceremonies. Besides, in the traditional (Confucian) Korean society, a man has a higher status than a woman. Further, the image of a female is rather negative³⁷. Another aspect, which was mentioned, is also crucial. In Confucianism there must be gender segregation in the household. This was extended to religious and political spheres. Men fulfilled their spiritual needs, but women were excluded and had to find other forms of religious expression. Additionally, Koreans still believe that females are more inclined to shamanism. This is due to an historical assumption. In the past women's educational level was lower than men's. If they had been properly educated, they would have had relevant knowledge and would have forsaken shamanistic beliefs and practices. Furthermore, ceremonies in *Muism* consist of singing and dancing vigorously, which was perceived as unsuitable for men³⁸. The above proves that men can also be a *mudang*.

The Shamanistic *Kut* Ceremony

Yun I-heum considers the *kut* ceremony as the most important aspect of Korean shamanism. According to *Muism*, the gods, demons or souls of dead people become angry and further cause sorrow and evil things to ordinary men³⁹. They do so because they have troubles to find their place in the other world. Choi Sang-chin and Kim Ui-chol believe the reason for that is their experiencing of *han*. It is a feeling emerging from negative emotions such as anger, sorrow, frustration, grief and resentment. The

³⁶ Yang Jong-sung, 'Korean Shamanism...', pp. 29-31.

³⁷ Choi Joon-sik, *무교*..., pp. 109-110.

³⁸ Choi Gil-seong, *한국인의 한* [Han of Koreans], Seoul: Yejeonsa, 1996, pp. 68-69.

³⁹ Yun I-heum, *한국인의 종교관*..., p. 85.

sacred creature experiences such emotions due to serious problems it encounters. So, to overcome *han*, bring back and uphold order, people should help higher spirits to resolve their issues. In result, the gods will provide fortune, happiness and support for people⁴⁰.

John A. Grim argues there are a few offering ceremonies, which are distinguished from one another. They are identified according to their purpose such as healing the sick (*Pyong kut*), guiding the dead (*Chinogi* or *Ogu kut*), initiating a new shaman (*Naerim kut*), providing happiness (*Chaesu kut*), or bringing rain (*Yongsin kut*). The ceremony itself, its time and length and its identifying titles vary in different areas of Korea⁴¹.

The *kut* ceremony is a series of large rituals, consisting of several parts or scenes and it is performed for a specific purpose. First, the shaman has to prepare the sacrificial table by magically purifying it. Then, the offerings, which usually consist of food, alcohol, money or incense, are put on the prepared table. Later, the *mudang* performs the *cheongbae*, during which the shaman chants to specific rhythms supplicating higher spirits to come into their bodies. Then, there is *kongsu*, the most important part of the ceremony. Here, the gods are entertained to make them happy and willing to deliver a message of how to resolve a problem. Its importance is expressed at the moment when the spirit through *mudang*'s lips gives advice on how to solve a troublesome issue for the clients. Then, the shaman sends spirits back to the other world. It is worth noting that during the ritual the *mudang* sings and performs an energetic dance. The Korean drum, called *janggo*, also plays an important role in the ceremony. The shaman uses it to experience the state of ecstasy, then to reach the trance state⁴².

The *kut* ceremony itself plays a significant function in Korean society. It is the crucial element that unites people together. During the ritual all family members gather to pacify the gods. Moreover, the *kut* ceremony preserves Korean traditional values⁴³.

⁴⁰ Choi Sang-chin, Kim Ui-chol, *Conceptual and Empirical Analyses of Han: An Indigenous Form of Lamentation*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 1992, p. 7.

⁴¹ J. A. Grim, 'Chaesu Kut: A Korean Shamanistic Performance', *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1984, p. 236.

⁴² Yang Jong-sung, 'Korean Shamanism...', pp. 30-33.

⁴³ Ch'oe Kil-sung, 한국 무속 연구 [Korean Shaman Studies], Taegu: Kyemyong University Press, 1989, p. 41.

Korean Muism and Shamans in Contemporary Korea

Without doubt, shamanism is an important part of Korean national culture and religion. It can be considered as a system of belief or as folklore. Throughout the centuries it was made to function on the margins of Korean culture and society. However, it is noteworthy how *Muism* finds itself in contemporary Korean society.

As was said, shamanism is a part of indigenous beliefs that are deeply rooted in Korean minds. Oh Kyung-geun and Lee Gyu-tae mention that it has had a remarkable impact on Koreans' mentality. There is a common belief, especially among the younger generation and citizens of big cities, that shamanism is a superstition, and this often leads them to treat it with disdain. Nonetheless, Korean people acknowledge it to be an intangible cultural asset. It functions as an influential repository of tradition and values⁴⁴. It should be noted that after the Korean War, Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world. *Mudangs* were seen as relicts of a poor past and an element impeding modernisation and progress. In the 1970s, Park Chung-hee, the president of the Republic of Korea, initiated the *Saemaul Undong* Movement to modernise the country. At the same time, the *Misin Tapa Undong* Movement (to defeat the worship of gods) reached its peak and tried to forcefully eradicate *Muism*, mythology and other folk beliefs⁴⁵.

Kim Chong-ho confirms *Muism* has been continuously suppressed despite the change of ruling ideologies throughout Korean history. The important fact is it has never been approved, but it always despised, no matter what ideology ruled in different periods⁴⁶. It should be noted here that mostly elderly people who live in villages support shamanistic beliefs. Park Ki-bok more or less confirms this supposition in his documentary of the shaman world, *Yeongmae*. His film includes the communal rite in a fishing village with men and women joining the shamans in vigorous dancing. The camera shows happy faces, but each

⁴⁴ Choe Sang-hun: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/06/world/asia/06iht-shaman.1.6527738.html?_r=2&pagewanted=2%20 (accessed 20Aug%208,%202010) (accessed 06.12.2017).

⁴⁵ Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF. South Korean Popular Religion in Motion*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010, pp. 4-7.

⁴⁶ Kim Chong-ho, 'Cultural Politics or Cultural Contradiction? Prejudice against Shamanism in Korean Society', in *Korean Studies at the Dawn of the Millennium*, Cho Young-a (ed.), Melbourne: Monash University, Monash Asia Institute, 2001, p. 38.

face in the frame belongs to elderly people⁴⁷. This also indicates that past values are idealised and an ancient religious nostalgia is still an important issue.

Laurel Kendall says Korean *mudangs* have claimed new respect as national icons. However, they are blamed for not adapting to modern times. Even more, the shamans are routinely criticised for charging high fees, encouraging excesses of offering food and ritual paraphernalia, performing abbreviated rituals and neglecting to learn the long chants and ritual lore held in the fragile memories of elderly shamans⁴⁸.

Geoffrey Cain claims that Koreans are seeing a resurgence in interest in shamanism. He believes popular culture and the Asian financial crisis of 1997 helped in the revival of shamanistic beliefs on the Korean Peninsula⁴⁹. L. Kendall also stresses the significance of the Asian financial crisis period, otherwise known as the IMF era. During it, the shamans saw many clients who had lost their jobs, clients at risk of losing their jobs, businesses, investments, clients who could not meet their payments, clients who had taken credits and clients experiencing domestic violence as a consequence of economic stress and suicides. Such economic instability hit the shaman world and helped it revive. Even when the crisis had receded, *mudangs* had clients who feared losing their positions, jobs and investments⁵⁰.

Furthermore, G. Cain and Choe Sang-hun strongly claim that nowadays, Korean shamans are highly adaptable. They have found ways to fuse their ancient customs with modern expectations. Korean *mudangs* use the internet to offer online fortune-telling and book ceremonies. They even write posts on their blog sites and participate in TV shows. Both authors note that even politicians consult shamans, asking them where they should relocate their ancestors' remains to ensure good luck in their next election⁵¹. To conclude, Korean shamanism is an adaptable instrument that responds to the modern realities of society and economy.

⁴⁷ Pak Ki-bok, Cho Seong-u, 영매 : 산자와죽은자의화해 [Mudang: Reconciliation between the Living and the Dead], Seoul: Korean Film Council, 2006.

⁴⁸ Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias...*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Cain: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2010-02-07/modern-shamans-all-rage-s-korea?page=0%2C1> (accessed 06.12.2017).

⁵⁰ Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias...*, pp. 146-147, 151.

⁵¹ Geoffrey Cain, Choe Sang-hun, *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Han Do-hyun notes that shamanism has been considered by some foreign or native scholars as an archetype of Korean culture. Especially those who analyse Korean folklore, treat *Muism* as the root or core of Korean religiosity and culture⁵². However, the majority of Koreans considers *Muism* as vulgar, coarse, trivial and primitive superstition. Furthermore, it is treated with disdain. Additionally, Koreans deny they have any bonds with their indigenous religion. However, one can easily disprove this belief. That is because *Muism* is the essence of Korean culture, art, literature, myths and even religious beliefs.

Probably, the main reason why Korean shamanism is perceived as valueless and unimportant phenomenon is that *Muism* did not have political ambitions and still remains that way. Consequently, shamanism was not supported by the Korean ruling class and the elites of the society. Any religion not approved and supported by the powerful class of a society has automatically little chances to survive. Furthermore, such a system of belief is treated as inferior and without good values. Additionally, people do not know it, do not want to know it and treat it with prejudice.

Korean shamanism can be compared with the Japanese Shintō; actually both religions have many things in common. But the difference between them is the Japanese native religion is strictly connected with the ruling class. Moreover, it is not treated with disdain and superstition. Unfortunately, Koreans did not follow the same path.

It should be noted that Korea is a state of many religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity. What is important is that all of them coexist peacefully. *Muism* promotes certain values like tolerance, unity and open-mindedness. Its primary goal is to achieve harmony. These elements are common in Confucian or Buddhist philosophy.

Without any doubt, *Muism* owes its poor status in the socio-cultural sphere to the activity of Buddhist and Confucian monks and scholars. Also, the state ideologies of the Goryeo and the Joseon dynasties led to disapproval of the Korean native religion. However, *Muism* survived and has adapted to modern times.

⁵² Han Do-hyun, 'Shamanism, Superstition and the Colonial Government', *The Review of Korean Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, July 2000, p. 34.

Furthermore, *Muism* is not a symbol of a stereotyped phenomenon. Interestingly, it is monopolised by females. It constitutes an indigenous part of the Korean culture, religion, tradition and national identity, which may be observed in the *kut* ceremony. It is a precious cultural and national heritage of the Korean state.

It is noteworthy that *Muism* adapted to modern times. *Mudangs* have connected ancient beliefs with the spirit of capitalism and benefit from it. According to L. Kendall, shamans reached material success. The evidence is easily seen. Good clothes, private cars, comfortable housing, decorated shrines, flourish rings and necklaces are signs of a successful practice⁵³. The shamans' wealth proclaims that monotheistic religions are insufficient. People are greedy for fortunes in every aspect of their life. In contrast to monotheistic systems, *Muism* guarantees good luck. On the other hand, the wealthy may provide proof of the efficacy of the gods who have brought the shamans many clients. According to L. Kendall, the *mudangs'* financial status also results from good education, family background and breeding⁵⁴, attributes that have a practical validity in Korea.

To sum up, Korean shamanism is deeply rooted in Korean minds. It functions as an important repository of tradition and culture. Undertaking shamanism is not a difficult process. However, *mudangs* with their beliefs are criticised for what they perform. Korean *Muism* has survived mostly in rural areas and in the minds of elderly people. Unfortunately, the younger generation is evincing doubts, founded on prejudice. Their lives are based on rationality or at least logical assumptions and modern approaches. They do not seem to believe that magic, rituals, modernity and rationality coexist in the one world as a complex fusion. Due to this, they will not support and accept shamanistic beliefs as a national native religion. Thus, the development of *Muism* into a higher spiritual culture is not possible regardless tolerance and open-mindedness of Koreans. Still, it will be perceived in a negative way.

⁵³ Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias...*, pp. 141.

⁵⁴ Laurell Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea. Of Gender, Morality and Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 85-119.

