



# Cultural Partnership Initiative

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# Shamanism in South Korea and Kyrgyzstan

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## Introduction

Nowadays shamanism as an ancient religion still continues to exist in lives of people in Korea, Mongolia, Central Asia, Siberia and other regions of Asia-Pacific. Among those countries Korea distinguishes itself by the fact that in the country besides shamanism there are other religions that are co-practiced today, which are Confucianism, Buddhism, local rites and village ceremonies, and lately, Christianity; however, shamanism has a significant role in people's lives. All those forms of worshipping are different but nevertheless Koreans had managed to integrate them into their everyday life and create a rich intangible cultural heritage, to mention few "Arirang" and "Pansori". Korean shamanism referred as "Mugyo" has long exerted a very strong influence on Korean people, and it still does" (Choi, 2006). Shamanism had influenced on formation of diverse intangible and also tangible cultural heritage of people. Therefore, we can see that Koreans practice so many diverse religions, which distinguishes them from other ethnicities.

Medieval Europe was enjoying an artistic inspiration during the dominance of Christianity, as evidence there are numerous Christian iconic depictions of Maria, Jesus and other sacred entities. It leads to an idea that religion can serve as a drive for development of art in a context of culture. However, shamanism as an old religion is very different from orthodox religions such as Christianity and Islam in a way that it has features as abstractive behavior and unexplainable abilities, which make shamanism extraordinary. But, Korean history shows that shamanism is no less powerful than Christianity in influence on cultural heritage of society. For this reason, shamanism now is gaining attention within Korean and western scholars.

Analysis of Mugyo in comparison with shamanism of societies living far from Korea can interpret some similarities and variations between Koreans and other Asian ethnicities of Central Asia and Altai regions. In this sense, shamanism in Kyrgyzstan would be a good example for this point, since functions of it are almost similar to Korean one but different in some other aspects. Subjects of interest are to find how shamanism has been effecting on cultural heritage of two

nations, and compare them in terms of influence. Therefore, shamanism will be analyzed both in terms of Korea and Kyrgyzstan. Through study of characteristics of shamanism it'd be possible to realize an interpretation to those questions. Also important aspect is how religion was forming within early communities. Said that, shamanism might be a tool to understand both Korean and Kyrgyz culture.

## Outline of Shamanism in Korea

In a history of Korea, three religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Western Christianity had fundamental penetration into Korean society. However, in Korea, long before the appearance of foreign religions, there was a local traditional religion and modern scholars believe that it was shamanism. Shamanism was the most powerful system of beliefs among other local religions in early Korean society and played a central role in everyday life. Unlike other world religions, in shamanism Koreans could express their daily needs through various rituals. For these purely practical reasons, Confucianism and Buddhism have included some elements of shamanism in their religious system. Although shamanism never achieved the status of official religion of Korea, it had a huge impact both on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity (Kim G., n.d.)

In fact, for Korean people shamanic rituals are a collection of different types of folk art. A process of ritual called "gut" consists of music, dance and drama; a shaman sings and dances improvising on the run a variety of formulations accompanying all appropriate behavior and gestures. It can be hard to differentiate each element of Gut including music, drama, and dance as an independent artistic genre but we can assume that the ritual itself could be a source from which Korean art had been evolving.

Shamanism has an important place in the history of Korean art, as it played a major role in the development of almost all forms of art. Korean shamanism was the basis of all cultural genres and traditional practices (Jinseok, 2013). Paintings of numerous shamanistic deities were the first paintings in Korea with a religious theme; shaman sculptures preceded subsequent sculptural genre (Kim G., n.d.). Paper flowers, lanterns and boats used at the time of gut served as a development of art from paper craft, shamanic ritual costumes, which are a rich source of information for the study of tailoring art in Korea. So, one can easily find reflections of shamanism in cultural heritage of Koreans. Usage of images of animals, flowers, trees and other natural objects on paintings, sculptures and clothes, suggests on unique concept of Asian shamanism which was a source of intermediary between supernatural and human beings. Since in shamanism all natural objects have its deities, the depictions have certain meanings symbolizing harmonious co-existence with nature.

The concept of "yin-yang" has implications in every aspect of Mugyo. When a shaman proceeds to ritual for curing someone from sickness or communicating with deities and spirits, he or she is actually dealing with bringing harmony to its client and community as a whole. In this sense, "yin" is a nature including supernatural beings and "yang" is human beings; and shaman

works to keep a balance between them. By the logic, yin and yang should be opposite things like day and night or life and death (Kim I., 2005). Image of yin-yang is even seen in national flag of Republic of Korea, which suggests about a nationwide impact of shamanism.

### **Outline of Shamanism in Kyrgyzstan**

Since Mongol invasion to Kyrgyz territories, Kyrgyz had being influenced by Mongol ideology. Not many researches were made about Kyrgyz shamanism because of nomadic way of life and absence of written evidences. However, it's possible to assume that shamanism came from Mongol shamans because Mongols were nomads and they were susceptible to animism and shamanic activities due to inhabitation in natural environment. Assimilation of Kyrgyz with Mongols had happened rapidly that nomadism became strongly rooted in lives of Kyrgyz people. Like Mongols, Kyrgyz people passed on their cultural heritage through oral form because simply they didn't have a written language. However, tradition of oral passage of stories facilitated Kyrgyz to maintain their identity throughout thousands of years.

Long time ago, Kyrgyz shamans were attached with great importance and, accordingly, they played a big role in lives of common people. It was believed that the shamans were able to communicate with fire, wind, trees, and with almost all the phenomena of nature, and even contact with the other world, for example with the souls of the dead. Kyrgyz people in ancient times lived by separate clans and tribes; they all had their own shamans and treated with special respect for their ability to guess, predict events, to heal and so on (Mokeyev, 2013).

Over time people began to lead a sedentary lifestyle; Kyrgyz lands began to emerge into cities, to develop medicine, education, science and etc. Accordingly, the need for shamans and their role in society began to decline sharply, although depending on the conditions of certain territories and regions, this process came with varying degrees of intensity. Ancient shamanism originated in pre-modern society of Kyrgyz tribes is now becoming obsolete with the arrival of Islam, which brought new principles of belief.

Nomadism had not allowed engaging into immersive cultural art because constant movement was accompanied with devastative wars, natural disasters and psychological instability because of search for new pasturelands. Therefore not many cultural elements with shamanic traits were inherited; however there are clothes with ornaments illustrating wild deer. According to Kyrgyz legend, Kyrgyz ethnos was originated from deer, so people often call it as "mother-deer". Nowadays, in some schools one can find fairy-tale and legend books about origin of Kyrgyz from deer. In old times, people worshipped deer as a "creator" but today they treat it as a sacred animal that it's prohibited to kill, otherwise, it's believed that violator will be cursed by mother-deer.

There is even a Kyrgyz feature film, emphasizing a sacredness of deer. According to plot, a hunter obsessed by killing deer, in one of his hunting journeys accidentally shoots his son, and at the end he is trapped on a high rock. A message of the film is that a harm caused to deer will be returned to its initiator. An interesting point here is that Kyrgyz people still believe in legends

about deer and treat them with high respect. Probably, deer was an object of worship by early Kyrgyz shamans, so shamanism has been greatly influencing on Kyrgyz society. Even today, sacredness of deer is reflected through fairy-tales and legends.

### **Comparison of Korean and Kyrgyz Shamanism**

Common characteristic of shamanism in Korea and Kyrgyzstan is a "fear of death". Religions are treated as a relief from fear of death. Shamanism is no exception, moreover it lets participants to actively take part in shamanic activities and feel emotions, undergo "trance" conditions, and most importantly to understand and deal with the phenomenon of death while communicating with spirits.

In a word, it could be said that the purpose of shamanic rituals is to harness the power of gods to drive away misfortune and bring good luck to people in their everyday lives (Kim In-whoo, 2005). In this sense, mission of shamanic activities of all ethnic communities are similar. Today, each human being is susceptible to hardships of life such as death of close person, sickness, and stress associated with overflow of information and so on. If social problems now are becoming more and more intense, then probably earlier communities had social problems too but at different level according to their social development. So, this notion makes clear that shamanism originated through conscious act to respond to those hardships.

One of the main differences in shamanism found in Korea and Kyrgyzstan are that Korean shamans by nature are women whereas Kyrgyz shamans are predominantly men. "The gender of mudang provides yet another interesting subject to understand their identity. In Siberia, a region long considered to be the very root of Korean Shamanism, the male mudang outnumber their female counterparts. But in Korea, the situation is completely reversed" (Choi, 2006). So, by common, shamans of Siberia and Central Asia were men whereas in Korea are women.

In nomadic societies like Kyrgyz and Mongol, role of man was much more important because men were sustainers, protectors and entertainers. In old times Kyrgyz women were moving together with family and livestock all the time. So, it was less likely for them to engage with any activity beyond household adjustment. But, Korean women were settled in a certain place and they were expected to stay at home and implement household duties such as taking care of children, cooking and etc; they had less movement than Kyrgyz women. Therefore, stability gave Korean women more freedom in religious as well as artistic expressions. Those social issues most probably had been effecting on gender roles in religious expressions.

Since Koreans practiced shamanism for quite a long time the latter is highly integrated into lives of people as well as Confucianism and Buddhism. Moreover, Korean shamanism is not only the old religion but also an intangible cultural heritage which is presented to public by means of stage performances. Shamanism ceremonies composed of music, dance, and singing are being performed on stage for the general public (Yim D., n.d).

One important commonality of Korean and Kyrgyz shamanism is that they didn't

disappeared even if they are often unrecognized; rather, it's transformed into traditional culture; that is, became inseparable element of identity. Therefore, Korean and Kyrgyz people do not fully realize that they practice shamanism because it's already a part of their culture.

### Characteristics of Korean Shamanism

As it was already mentioned, shamanism co-existed with Confucianism; there is a principal difference in Confucianism and Mugyo beliefs. This diagram will illustrate some dominant ideologies of two religions.

Confucianism	Masculine, hierarchical, formal, merits order and discipline, community-bound
Mugyo	Feminine, egalitarian, informal, encourages freedom from restraints, family-bound

\*Choi Joon-Sik's "Folk-Religion. The Customs in Korea", p.37

Looking at this diagram one might say that both religions ideologies are important for maintaining society in order. However, Mugyo was persecuted and deemed by ruling elite of Joseon Dynasty as outcast of society because it populated free expression of emotions but, on contrary, neo-Confucianism, which came later after Confucianism, "view human nature as a fierce battlefield in which reason engages a war of dominance with the passions, and their object is to repress passionate appetites in our nature and recover and promote our innate rationality"...Confucianism "is a way of thinking that values reason and rational principles most" (Choi J., 2006. p.39).

As a fact, all human beings are dealing with issues of death, so do shamans but in more expressive way. Gut has proven particularly effective in dealing with these sorts of conflicts and difficulties. There are many shamanistic rituals devoted to souls of dead, which bring relief to them by shaman's aid. Another important point is that Mugyo is attractive because people find peace while they lost someone they love; in this kind of occasions shamans referred as "mudang" try to convince a person who lost beloved one that the latter is still "alive".

### Characteristics of Kyrgyz Shamanism

Some people believe that the religion and ritual practice of Turks, including Kyrgyz, evolved on the basis of shamanic rituals. Shamanism is based on belief in communion of shaman with spirits in a state of ritual ecstasy (Baibosunov, 1990).

Author of the 11th century, Gardizi in his "Zayn al-Akhbar" writes that "the ancient Kyrgyz lost consciousness while performing musical ritual, and when they came to, they started foresee future". According to him, Kyrgyz shamans were multi-talented and imaginative people. Shaman, by common understanding is a man endowed with magic and knowledge about supernatural

beings, he is a poet, musician, prophet, and at the same time a doctor. In short, shamans were able to do multiple things that were in demand in ancient time. F. Poyarkov noted that shamans were able to lick a hot sickle or a knife, to stand on bare feet on a bottom of hot boiler, to swallow a few alive snakes and other similar tricks. The main function of Kyrgyz shamans in the late 19th century was "treating the mentally ill people." Among many abilities, they could predict future and identify thieves indicating where and how to find a stolen thing and etc (Bayalieva, 1972).

Two types of shamans were distinguished as black shamans and white shamans. Black ones were considered as more powerful because they could not only heal the sick, expel evil spirits from a body but they could send spirits to other people in order to harm them. Shamans got their profession whether by enforcement or by some psychological illness or by inheritance. Usually, similar to Korean shamans, a person becoming a shaman saw spirits in a dream or in reality, and the latter forced him to become a shaman. In case of refusal or disobedience this person was severely suffered by illness that sometimes ended in death (Tabyshaliev, 1976). Only after the initiation ceremony called "kezyun achuu" shaman was set to his duties.

### Shamanism and Pansori

The Pansori is a traditional music of Korea. It constitutes a singer who holds a folding fan and drummer who plays the Korean traditional drum (Kim D, 2011)

Shamans while performing their rituals tend to immerse into the state of "trance" or condition of changed consciousness. In this state they become emancipated from social norms and prejudices, and start doing abstract acts like expressive dancing, speaking etc. There are some similarities between Shamans and Pansori singers in a way how they express themselves. As it's normally understood as something out of normal thing by common people when a person can dance or sing throughout five or seven hours without break; however, for Shamans and Pansori singers it's pretty much acceptable that is considered as a part of their activity. Scholars have been debating about possible origins of Pansori that it could originate from traditional tales, professional entertainers, and Gangchang (storytelling) literature but the most supported idea about its origin is shamanic epics (Kim T, 1961).

### Shamanism and Manas epic-telling

The epic "Manas" is complex and multifaceted intangible cultural heritage of Kyrgyz people. It tells about deed of a Kyrgyz hero named Manas who fought with numerous tribes to keep Kyrgyz identity intact. Until today, he is considered as a national savior. The epic consists of three volumes: Manas, Seitek and Semetei. Seitek and Semetei are smaller epics than Manas, and illustrate events related to Manas's sons.

An analysis of structure of the shaman spells and shamanic ritual of worship may shed light to understanding the formation of some traditional poetic formulas occurring in the Manas epic.

Traces of shamanic ritual can be found in parts such as alkys (good wishes), kargysh (curses), Arman, kereez (regret, will), and partly in koshokah (lamentation), which comprise in the poetic structure of the epic "Manas". Perhaps these genres are closely related to shamanic rituals and they could serve as a primary material, which contributed to the formation of the epic genre. In the epic we can note that some elements of shamanism are involved in the plot structure such as repeated episodes of magical ceremonies. "Paganism in the epic "Manas" prevails over Islamism, in this way suggesting that individual motives of epic "Manas" were formed in the early stages of the tribal society" (Kydyrbaeva, 1995).

### Conclusion

Shamanism survived in Korea even facing fierce opposition led by a government policy. In Kyrgyzstan, Russian domination effectively swiped out shamanism in most of the areas of the country; however, it still exists in rural areas whether in a form of pure shamanism or blended with traditional culture. Shamanic traits of common folk are not easily recognizable nowadays in Korea or Kyrgyzstan because it's transformed into their cultures and people don't treat it as religion. For instance, on a Kyrgyz national holiday "Nooruz", which is inscribed in UNESCO list, a shamanic ritual of expelling evil spirits from a house using scents is practiced. In day to day occasions some other rituals can be found such as transferring illness of person by spitting to bowl of water or touching a head with hot iron, and etc. Those kinds of rituals are often used in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan. Similar situation is in Korean shamanism that people don't associate themselves with Mugyo; however they practice some elements from it. Shamanic elements in Christianity are also worth of discussing. "The evidence of Shamanic elements working in the Korean churches can be found, rather, in the site and setting of major prayer sessions. In western churches, prayer meetings at dawn are rare occasions; but in Korean churches it has become almost a daily practice as it is both in Mugyo and in Buddhism" (Choi J., 2006). We can see that Korean Christians evidently brought Mugyo to the western religion as with Confucianism and Buddhism.

Korean and Kyrgyz instances show inevitable mix of shamanism with culture and other religions. The reason lies in the specifics of shamanism in addressing actual problems of human beings.

Existence of shamanic elements in intangible cultural heritage as Pansori and Manas is obvious and, therefore, shamanism is important in tracing back an origin of cultural heritage of people. More researches should be initiated on understanding the link of shamanism with intangible cultural heritage. Due to a shortage of information about shamanism, it worth more qualitative research on comparing shamanism in two countries and its influence on culture of Korea and Central Asia.

The strong viability of shamanism implies that people need it as long as other world religions, as Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism etc., have gaps in explanation on some actual issues of human life such as death and sickness.

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