

Korean Shamanism - Religion of Reconciliation and Coexistence

Koreański szamanizm – religia pojednania i współistnienia

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Abstract

This article is to explain the basic rules of Korean shamanism. First the religious views of Koreans are presented. The importance of harmony in the lives of Koreans is highlighted. It is stressed that the concepts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism do not exclude one another, do not erect barriers and they promote mutual tolerance and are intertwined in Korea. Next, the role of Korean shamanism in helping common people solve their problems are discussed. Korean shamanism is one of the best examples of unorganized religions and possesses features typical of such religions. Shamanism has a well-formulated system of beliefs as well as behaviours and conduct but its practices and its canons are not well-organized. Consequently, shamanism plays a latent function in society similarly as systems of values, morals, manners and emotions. The author also describes the shamanic ritual called *gut*. Finally, the contemporary views on and approaches to Korean shamanism are touched upon.

1 Introduction. Religious Views of Koreans

The religious views of Koreans reflect their emotions/sentiments and they are a historically grounded phenomenon. They also demonstrate their outlook on the world and emotional life. The approach of Koreans to various religious denominations is very tolerant and open-minded. Koreans simply accept and welcome religions from all over the world. Such open-mindedness of Koreans also finds reflection in their tolerant and all-pervasive attitude to foreign cultures. That is to say, Koreans do not aim at proving their identity by distinguishing themselves from other cultures and

nations (Yun I-heum *et al.* 2001: v). Instead of emphasizing differences, they strive for achieving harmony between themselves and foreigners. It may easily be seen in both their emotional and intellectual spheres of life. They try to blend what is typical of their culture and life with foreign elements. It may be the result of their open-mindedness and their avoidance of exclusivism and they strive at achieving peace and harmony in all spheres of life. Therefore, stunning as it may be in traditional Korean religions the nationalistic attitudes are extremely limited or even non-existent. Creative thinkers of traditional Korean religions, such as Buddhism or Confucianism, pursue achieving harmony as the ultimate goal, the ideal.

Harmony is the order preserved between all things. Therefore harmony is an ideal, no matter when, where and for whom. In other words, harmony is always an ideal, a goal for everyone, everywhere and at any time. But harmony is attainable only when one crosses religious barriers, canons and schemata. That is the best embodiment of the ideal life of a mature man. That is why, a true religious thinkers aiming at achieving harmony will not follow the path of the orthodox views but due to the inquisitive, questioning mind they will remain tolerant and open-minded. Their intellectual drive is the key for the creation of a new culture.

Summing up the features of religious views of Koreans include the following elements:

1. the views are a mixture of traditional reasoning with the original outlook of shamanism;
2. the rule of harmonizing national and foreign elements derives from the idea of unification which is a typical, continuous and long-lasting tradition of Korean religions;
3. the rule of unification when applied to inter-religious dimensions supports peaceful co-existence and co-habitation;
4. the religious outlook of Koreans is strictly connected with their acts as they do what they think is right in this respect. This unity of thought and action/reaction results from their practicisim.

Such a practical approach lets them adapt very well to everyone and does not lead to exclusionism and ostracism.

Therefore, in Korea the concepts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism do not exclude one another, do not erect barriers and they promote mutual tolerance and are intertwined.

Practicisim of Koreans towards religions and their striving at mutual co-existence, unity and tolerance between religions sometimes lead to vagueness of their philosophical thinking and cultural chaos. Despite that, it has enabled Koreans to unify their traditional culture with foreign ones. Thus, Korean attitude of striving for tolerance and harmony is the fundamental trend in Korean religious culture. Therefore, three traditional religions of Korea, that is to say Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have always co-existed in harmony with shamanism.

Each religion present in the territory of Korea over a span of history have had to go through the process of intermingling with other religions, but first and foremost with shamanism. It should be stressed here that the religion which intermingled with shamanism most was Buddhism, but Confucianism was also affected in many respects. Shamanism also pervaded Christianity. One of the best examples of such an interaction is the prayer at dawn which is present only in Korean Christianity. What is typical of Korean shamanism is the prayer at dawn or going to pray high in the mountains. And Christianity has adopted the prayer at dawn. Korean Christianity strives for achieving God's blessing and happiness for oneself. Koreans frequently perceive religion through fortune or misfortune which may be brought upon them by religion which is deeply rooted in their mentality by shamanic concepts. Thus, shamanism is the core of Korean culture. A Korean is usually a Confucian and Buddhist at the same time, that is to say as far as morality is concerned he is a Confucian but his outlook of life is typical of Buddhism (Lee Gyu-tae 2000: 5). That is how the reason makes Koreans act but emotionally they are still closely related with shamanism. Confucianism and Buddhism represent typical Asian thinking. They have been shaping a well-developed culture (higher culture) of a few ruling the nation, but shamanism has been a lower culture for common people. That lower culture has always been responsible for upholding traditions and culture in common life. Traditional Confucian and Buddhist thinking, representing the higher culture, is characterized by an abstract philosophical system. The lower culture encompasses traditional shamanism. Shamanism is the most important element of the attitude as far as the religious and cultural views of Koreans are concerned. But shamanism is a superstition for Koreans because the older generation of scholars received the European education. It is natural for the older generation of scholars who carried out their research applying European methodology. It is a result of the fact that they look at their traditional culture not with the eyes of Koreans but with the eyes of foreigners. Therefore, being prejudiced and misinformed as far as shamanism is concerned, they frequently treat shamanism with disdain.

Since Confucianism and Buddhism were adopted by Korea from China, shamanism departed from the ruling class and started functioning at the margin of culture. Korean shamanism has not been supported by the elites of the society for over 1600 years and that is why it has had no chance to develop into a higher culture (Yun I-heum *et al.* 2001: 118). Therefore, Korean shamanism –preserves a unique prototype and concepts of good and bad luck. Throughout history new gods have been added. The outlook on the existence of the world and life typical of shamanism in Korean culture play a marginal role and constitute a sort of subculture. Thus, shamanism supplements the higher culture. Despite transformations of higher culture and political systems, due to its unique nature shamanism has remained and survived till our times preserving traditional, folk culture which has been passed from generation to generation. To sum up, shamanism is a core of the traditional Korean culture but still it has been treated with disdain

and neglected. Why has it happened so? This results from the fact that shamanism keeps away from the ruling class, people having power in the state. It is rejected by the upper classes of society. Although there have been many practitioners and followers of shamanism, they have been unable to organize it and institutionalize it and consequently they have failed to gain power and have been treated with disdain. The main aim of religion is to deal not with earthly issues but rather with non-secular ones, but as long as it exists it can hardly remain independent from power. Despite the fact that extreme cruelty was inflicted and violence perpetrated by the followers of Islam and Christianity, both religions are considered true because they have power (Choi Jun-sik 2009: 190-191).

However, when we consider rituals or beliefs of Koreans, there are no significant differences between shamanism and other religions.

2 Features of Korean Shamanism

Korean shamanism is one of the best examples of unorganized religions and possesses features typical of such religions. Shamanism has a well-formulated system of beliefs as well as behaviours and conduct but its practices and its canons are not well-organized. Consequently, shamanism plays a latent function in society similarly as systems of values, morals, manners and emotions.

Religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism function as institutions which take an active part in the functioning of society and social systems and they function as religions of a given political system. Unorganized religions, however, in the course of history have been relegated to the sidelines as elements of marginal, normally unnoticeable culture. A primal religion shall be understood here as a not-institutionalized religion, which is unnoticeable and invisible but at the same time has an important role to play in society as it provides society with a system of values, morals and religious beliefs. Such primal religion does not comprehend other religions from the perspective of canons, dogmas and truth. It rather takes advantage of other religions by investigating and exploiting their approaches to good and bad luck (Choi Jun-sik 2009: 176-177). When we compare gods worshipped in Korean shamanism we may experience and learn how to be tolerant and open-minded. There are numerous gods worshipped in Korean shamanism. Not only there is a large number of gods, but in the wake of social transformations some of the gods may be easily removed or added, if need be. Korean shamanism does not treat its own gods in a special, preferential, superior way or does not treat other, non-shamanic gods in an inferior way. It perceives all gods at the equal footing. Additionally, there is no hierarchy between gods functioning in shamanism (Yun I-heum *et al.* 2001: 164). What really matters is the function of gods, that is to say what a given god may do for people as each of the gods has a function to play, is responsible for some part of a human life.

According to shamanism, the order may be preserved in the world and even in the universe if each of the numerous gods performs his function.

But if the gods do not obey the rules and interfere with the functions of other gods, the order is destroyed. In contrast to other religions, in Korean shamanism each god fulfils his duties and upholds the order in the world and the universe. In brief, in Korean shamanism each god preserves his nature, personality and identity and the hierarchy is non-existent. Korean shamanism shows harmony, order and equality. It is strictly connected with the fact that Koreans are tolerant and open-minded as far as religion and culture are concerned. Therefore, Koreans strive for the truth in all religions not only Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism but also Christianity, and they try to reveal it in all religions. They believe that when they achieve that aim, they will reveal the entire, complete truth.

Main functions of gods in Korean shamanism are the following ones:

1. there is one god everywhere responsible for every single place,
2. gods are responsible for healing people, protecting them against illnesses and beating illnesses,
3. in shamanism all matters of daily life are connected with gods and result from acts of gods, and that is why if we treat them properly and we resolve their *han* resulting from their grudges and resentments, the gods and the world may co-exist in harmony. Additionally, it provides people with peace and relief in an unstable earthly world (Yun I-heum *et al.* 2001: 49-50).

Korean shamanism aims at supporting the reasons for the existence of a human being by protecting people against bad luck and bringing them good luck. The thinking of Korean shamanism is far from noble idealism, abstract idealism or a pre-experience thinking system. Gods in Korean shamanism are not beings providing people with noble ideals or dreams. They support and protect the life of a human being by protecting people against bad luck and bringing them good luck. Thus, if a god or a religion are useful and affect the existence of a human being in a positive way, it is enough to accept them.

So let us get acquainted with the ideals and nature of Korean shamanism by learning something more about a shaman and a shamanic ritual called *gut*.

3 Structure and Stages of Korean Shamanic Ritual Called *GUT*

For sure, the most important element of Korean shamanism is a shamanic ritual called *gut*. According to shamanism all evil and sorrow suffered by a human being is caused by angry gods or souls of dead people (Yun I-heum *et al.* 2001: 85). But they become angry because they have not found their place in the other world yet. But why they have not been able to find their own place in the other world? Because they have experienced *han*. The term '*han*' is an integral part of Korean culture and history and consequently also literature (Choi Sang-chin, Kim Ui-chol 1992:7). *Han* is

one of the most important elements of Korean national identity and therefore it is said that the culture of Korea is the culture of *han*. The term *han* has an elusive, intrinsic and complex meaning. *Han* is a feeling emerging from negative emotions such as sorrow, grief, anger, frustration and resentment. The soul of the dead experiences *han* due to serious problems it encounters. So in order to overcome bad luck and problems, a human being should help the souls of the dead to resolve their *han*. The main aim of the shamanic ritual is to resolve the problem of *han* of the souls of the dead.

In order to understand shamanic rituals properly, one needs to understand who the shaman is and what his role is.

There are two types of shamans in Korea. The first type is called *sesummu*, that is a shaman by succession (세습무, *sesub* – succession). This is a profession which is usually practised by women. As a rule, a mother in law teaches her daughter in law how to conduct and perform ceremonies and rituals. Every person may become a *sesummu*. A *sesummu* cannot be a medium because she does not possess any special powers to contact the spirits. The second type is called *gangshinmu*, that is to say a charismatic shaman, a shaman called by spirits and gods (강신무, *gang* – descent, *shin* – spirit/god, *mu* – shaman), a shaman upon whom a spirit or a god descended. Therefore, not everyone may become a *gangshinmu* (Kim Taegon 1991:11). So in order to become a *gangshinmu* one must experience a shamanic illness. The shamanic illness leads to great psychological and physical suffering and has no causes. In other words, physicians have failed to find causes of this mysterious, incurable, painful and unexplained illness so far. Moreover, the medical treatment applied by doctors has no effect whatsoever. The illness may be overcome only when the haunted person accepts the spirit and becomes a shaman. If such a person does not want to accept the god who has descended upon him or her, the illness is not only incurable but it may also affect beloved family members and lead to their death. Consequently, hardly anyone can refuse to accept the spirit when faced with the choice of either accepting his or her fate or looking helplessly at his or her nearest and dearest dying. So why does a shaman need to follow such a hard path of life? In other religions it is not required of priests, clergymen and other religion practitioners. Firstly, a shaman is a man of extraordinary power and strength as he or she can communicate with gods. That is why they are different than other people. Additionally, gods are sacred creatures, a sacrum. That is why a man who wants to communicate with them must be blessed. But before he became a shaman, he had been an ordinary man. Being an ordinary man, he had to purify his soul, that is to say such man must suffer agonizing and extreme pain. One can purify one's soul only by going through such excruciating pain. Secondly, a shaman usually meets common people suffering a lot. People who do not suffer, do not seek the help of a shaman. A shaman is the last resort for them as they have looked for help everywhere and failed. Thus, a shaman who deals with the sorrow and pain of other people must be very strong so that he may even

take over their pain. In order to do so properly, he had to experience such excruciating pain himself. If he has experienced such feelings, he will be able to help suffering people.

The path of a shaman does not differ much from the path of a priest. So what is the path of the priest? A priest or a shaman is a human being who is supposed to live for others. As we have already mentioned, it is much more difficult to become a shaman than to become a Catholic priest, Evangelical parson or a Buddhist monk. A shaman sacrifices himself to help other people, so he is a true religion practitioner. Consequently, one must not claim that shamanism is just a primitive superstition. If it was a primitive superstition, no person would like to become a shaman. Some people claim that shamans cheat people and wheedle people out of their money but they hardly ever know anything about shamanism and the path of a shaman.

In shamanism, some rituals can be conducted only by an initiated person, that is to say a shaman called a *gangshinmu* conducts rituals and no other person is allowed to do it, similarly as in other religions, e.g. in Catholicism only a Catholic priest may conduct a Mass. As far as shamanism is concerned a ritual called *gut* is most important. Three persons meet in this ritual: (i) a shaman, (ii) a believer and (iii) a god. The most important reason for which people want to celebrate *gut* is to solve a problem, they have been unable to solve in any other available way. Being frustrated and helpless, they go to a shaman to gain superhuman strength. The shaman who conducts *gut* asks a god how to solve such a problem. The ritual comprises three stages:

- (i) inviting the god to attend the ritual,
- (ii) entertaining the god to make him happy and willing to help (give advice how to solve a problem), and finally
- (iii) sending the god back to the other world (Choi Gil-seong, 1996: 131-133).

A shaman dances and sings during this ritual. Each shaman has a patron – a god who protects him or her. A shaman will experience ecstasy by dancing vigorously. When in ecstasy/trans, he or she will hear the words uttered by the god, and then he will pass the message to his customers. That is the most important element of *gut* ceremony.

The main aim of shamanic ceremonies is to enable the souls of dead people to go to the other world without any grudges, resentments and sorrows (to put it in other words being relieved from *han*). That, in turn, enables living people to live their lives peacefully and normally, being convinced that the souls are happy.

To sum up, Korean shamanism aims at resolving the problem of grudges, resentment, anger and frustration, not in terms of a sin which needs to be punished or a wrong which must be avenged. It strives for enabling people live in peace and harmony with the living and the dead. It also enables people, the dead and the spirits live in peace and agreement.

As we can see from the examples presented earlier, the role of a shaman is to help people solve their problems, to reconcile with gods and

shamanism is a religion promoting peaceful coexistence with other religions and their gods. That is why Korean Shamanism is a religion of reconciliation and coexistence.

4 Conclusions

As a rule ordinary people who know nothing about shamanism and shamanic rituals, treat it with disdain and claim that it is a primitive superstition. Additionally, the majority of Koreans think they have no bonds with shamanism. But as we have seen before shamanism is the essence of the Korean art, culture, and even religious views of Koreans. The most important reason for which shamanism has been treated as a superstition is the fact that shamanism has remained out of power. There is no one universal truth which would be present in all religions. What people treat as the truth, is what they consider the message from the god. So the truth of a religion which is supported by the ruling class becomes the country's truth (Choi Jun-sik 2009: 180). Other religions which are not supported by the powerful ones, are automatically treated as inferior, are prejudiced against, are treated as superstitions. And that is exactly what happened to Korean shamanism. Japanese Shintoism is a religion which does not differ much from Korean shamanism. There are no specific canons, there is no holy scripture. The main aim of Shintoism is to treat gods well and in return be rewarded with good luck and be taken care of by them. But Shintoism has been strictly connected with the ruling class in Japan, and that is why it has become the most widespread religion in that country. No one treats Shintoism with disdain or treats it as a superstition. The practitioners of Shintoism are not disregarded but are rather respected by society. All that has been possible because Japanese have recognized Shintoism as part of their culture and as their religion. Unfortunately, Koreans have not followed the Japanese path. As already mentioned, Koreans looked at their culture through the prism of foreignness which resulted in treating shamanism with disdain. Some may say that it is the nature of the nation which was occupied by stronger nations for ages. Koreans should openly admit that Korean shamanism is part of their culture and their religion. They should also develop its positive features. Koreans strongly believe that it is possible to join into one all ideals and moral values of various religions. That way one may achieve the best form of a religion. Koreans do not want to be dependent on one god or one truth. Korean shamanism personifies such views of Koreans. The most important feature of religious views of Koreans is open-mindedness and dynamics. Such harmony, tolerance, mixture and reconciliation are the ideals upheld by Koreans and it may be a good way of solving conflicts and religious problems occurring nowadays almost all around the world.

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