

Mudang Among Us: A Look into Korean Shamanism and its Lasting Legacy

Edward Sehyun Park¹*

¹University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, Chicago, IL, USA

*Corresponding Author: eshpark0207@gmail.com

Advisor: Alorah Ella Saffran, aes2278@columbia.edu

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Abstract

Korean shamanism, also known as *muism* or *mugyo*, is one of the oldest continuing spiritual practices in the Korean peninsula. In this paper I examine *mugyo* and attempt to develop a contextual overview of its ritual components, focusing on a comparison of regional variations in Korean shamanic rituals as well as the various aesthetic elements that are commonly present in these often costly, time-consuming, and elaborate ritual performances. I attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of Korean shamanism, considering various perspectives to contextualize its cultural and ritual development. The history of Shamanism in East Asia dates back to prehistoric times, and is characterized by a belief in spirits that take various forms—often as ancestors, local folk deities, natural phenomena, and so on—and the role of shamans as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. Korean shamanism developed in conversation with Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Despite historical persecution, Korean shamanism remains integral to Korean culture in the modern day. Shamans are consulted for health, relationship, and business issues. Modern media often depict shamanism as both mysterious and healing. Korean shamanism is a resilient evolving practice that is closely woven into the fabric of Korean culture. This research is important in that it gives an accurate view of the spiritual practice, of which current scholarship is greatly lacking. By the end of the paper, the reader will gain a better understanding of shamanism as well as its significance to traditional Korean culture.

Keywords: Korean Shamanism, Muism, Mugyo

1. Introduction

Korean shamanism, also known as *muism* or *mugyo*, is one of the oldest continuing spiritual practices in the Korean peninsula. While the practice of shamanism in the modern era is not identical to the practice's oldest iteration, the legacy and history of Korean shamanism closely reflect the historical development of the Korean peninsula itself, and as such, shamanism remains in close cultural dialogue with state-sanctioned religious structures.

This paper examines Korean shamanism to develop a contextual overview of its ritual components, with particular focus on comparison of regional variations in Korean shamanic rituals, as well as the various aesthetic elements that are commonly present in these often costly, time-consuming, and elaborate ritual performances. This paper explores Korean shamanism as performance and interrogates the relationship between modern culture and the lasting influence of a spiritual and religious practice that has managed to persevere through many centuries of disregard, oppression, and begrudging tolerance. In addition, this paper attempts to examine the influence of shamanism on traditional and modern Korean cultural elements and looks to contemporary cultural media representations of Korean shamanism as a reflection of its enduring legacy. I seek to provide a detailed look at shamanism within East Asia, giving particular attention to shamanism in Korean culture. The objective of this paper is valuable in the study of East Asian humanities, as research on shamanism is rare—particularly in English. The lack of written work on this topic necessitates a comprehensive view of the spiritual practice, which this paper seeks to rectify.

2. Methodology and Limitations

The majority of academic ethnographic studies on folk beliefs, for good reason, rely on in-person fieldwork and a wide variety of aggregate primary sources such as material artifacts, video and audio archives, and witness testimony to historical and ritual events. However, there were no primary human sources consulted during research due to the following limitations. This project was limited by access to appropriate demographic samples, leading to difficulty in conducting primary quantitative research. In long-term ethnographic studies, primary human sources offer valuable research data. However, the reciprocal relationship built with these sources is often developed over years of sustained trust, goodwill, and mutual respect. In the study of folk religions such as shamanism especially, rituals and spiritual practices are often “closed,” meaning that outsiders and those not part of a specific cultural circle are rarely privy to the inner workings of the practice. Understandably, accessing accurate and reliable primary sources requires significant financial, temporal, and cultural resources, to which I unfortunately did not have adequate access when conducting the research for this paper.

As a result, this paper primarily relies on the synthesis of secondary academic sources to explore the topic of Korean shamanism. In my research and synthesis, I aim to carefully consider a diverse range of perspectives on the topic and identify areas of contentious scholarly disagreement. I also aim to assess the quality and validity of the sources from which I draw and give due weight to preexisting research based on primary ethnographic fieldwork. By synthesizing secondary sources I am able to provide a comprehensive scholarly overview of the general academic consensus on Korean shamanism as well as provide a more holistic context for the overall academic study of Korean shamanism, with particular attention to its cultural and ritual development.

3. Historical Development of the Shamanic Tradition in East Asia

As a folk religion and spiritual belief system closely associated with animism, there is no singular defining feature of shamanism nor an organized universal consensus on how it should be practiced. Instead, there is a wide range of varying scholarly viewpoints on the definition of shamanism as a spiritual and religious practice. Nevertheless, across these different viewpoints, there is a consistent emphasis on several core elements. Typically, shamanism as a general category of religious practice is understood as a complex and diverse tradition characterized by a belief in spirits that take various forms—often as ancestors, local folk deities, natural phenomena, and so on. Another key feature is a focus on shamans, who are seen as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds (Walraven, 2009, p. 75-76). John A. Grim, in a detailed 1984 survey of Korean shamanic ritual performances, notes that the rituals “can be identified as shamanistic because the professional practitioner, or shaman, invokes a spirit-power and manifests the radical change in personality and behavior associated with possession” (p. 235). Shamans play a significant role in many shamanic societies and feature prominently in practical ritual aspects of the belief, often being called upon to heal the sick, provide guidance and support, and protect their communities from harm.

The historical development of shamanism in East Asia can be traced back to prehistoric times. Evidence of shamanic practices has been found in archaeological sites dating back to the Paleolithic period. Shamanism is thought to have originated among hunter-gatherer societies, spreading to various regions of East Asia over time.

In China, evidence of shamanic practices has been found in archaeological sites dating back to the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BCE). In ancient China, shamans were seen as religious leaders and intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. Shamanism declined in China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) as Confucianism became the dominant ideology, and was eventually replaced by secular beliefs in the modern age. However, shamanism continues to be practiced sporadically in rural areas of China and remains a part of folk tradition even today.

In Japan, similar premodern archaeological evidence of shamanic practice dates back to the Jomon period (14000-300 BCE). In particular, a key feature of Japanese shamanism was the role of *itako*, who were blind female shamans and spiritual leaders “used exclusively for healing, while [other types of shamans] were used against illnesses as well as for exorcism and other purposes” (Sasamori, 1997, p. 87), and who were thought to have a special connection to the spirit world precisely due to their blindness. In his 1997 paper on the rituals performed by *itako*, Takefusa Sasamori emphasizes the musical aspect to these shamanic rituals, describing how “Itako use five kinds of instruments: 1) prayer

beads (juzu), 2) bows (yumi juzu), 3) handbells (shakujō), 4) drums (taiko) and 5) smaller bells (suzu), which are attached to the Oshira god figure” (p. 91). This demonstrates the wide range of ritual practices that have arisen out of different parts of East Asia. The current prevailing Japanese religion, Shintoism, is widely thought to be exemplary of the transition and development of shamanic tradition into organized religious practice. In Shintoism, female priestesses called *miko*, or shrine maidens, play an important role in the maintenance and performance of rituals and ceremonies. These *miko* are widely thought to have once been regarded as shamans but now represent a more institutionalized role within the overall structure of the Shintoism religion.

4. Korean Shamanism and the Development of its Ritual Elements

Korean shamanism shares many similarities with its other East Asian counterparts. For example, Grim observed: “the folk religious practices of East Asia are evident in the Korean shamanistic concept of illness and misfortune as caused by ancestral spirit” (Grim, 1984, p. 247). However, Korean shamanism is also a religious practice that is inherently unique to its host culture, due to its nature as a folk belief.

As a dynamic tradition with a rich history, Korean shamanism is characterized primarily by the diversity of its ritual elements, which retain influences from various schools of thought, including Buddhism, Taoism, and

Confucianism. Shamanic rituals are typically performed by *mudang*—female shamans—or *paksu*—male shamans—who serve as mediators between the human world and the spirit world (Ch’oe, 1984, p. 229). In Korean shamanism, *mudang* are generally much more important than *paksu* (p. 227), who hold “an insignificant place in Korean shamanism” (Lee, 1973a, p. 136). However, both *mudang* and *paksu* have similar roles, the main difference between them being how they perform their rituals (Lee, 1973b, p. 284). It is commonly believed that the female’s role as a *mudang* became much more integral to the religion simply because females had less access to education; education was required in order to sufficiently follow schools of thought



Figure 1. Depiction of a *mudang* performing a ritual.

such as Confucianism and Buddhism. Ch’oe explains how this view is limited, though, as the prominence of females in shamanism can be traced back to Korea’s general social structure (Ch’oe, 1984, p. 227). He explains that female *mudangs* needed the assistance of males to manage rituals and find clients, while the female is the actual performer (Ch’oe, 1984, p. 230). The stereotype of shamanism being the lesser, feminine school of thought has also contributed to the lack of male participants—an effect of societal structures rather than an exclusion of male shamans.

The historical development of many key ritual and aesthetic elements of Korean shamanism is closely linked to the introduction and influence of Buddhism in Korea. Buddhism was introduced to Korea in the 4th century CE, and it quickly became the dominant religion in the country throughout multiple changes of ruling dynasties. Despite the strong presence of a state-sponsored religion, shamanism as a folk religion continued to be practiced alongside Buddhism, and the two traditions often influenced each other (Chačatran, 2016, p. 59-61).

One of the most notable influences of Buddhism on Korean shamanism can be seen in the artistic elements of shamanic rituals. For example, many shamanic rituals today incorporate Buddhist chants, music, and dance. Many shamanic shrines and temples are also decorated with Buddhist symbols and imagery. Despite the universal influence of Buddhism, a great deal of regional variation in Korean shamanic rituals and aesthetic elements developed over time. For example, while shamanic rituals on Jeju Island tend to be more elaborate and involve colorful costumes and masks, the shamanic rituals of Seoul are typically more subdued. This differentiation is not always determined by geography, however. When shamans trained in one regional style relocate to a new area, they bring their practice with

them, often influencing the local tradition as well. Shamans are typically either hereditary or earn the practice through a spiritual apprenticeship. In modern-day Korean shamanism, plenty of the North Korean styles of shamanism such as Hamgyeong province-style shamanism are practiced in South Korea.

While it is important to understand the historical development of Korean shamanism in a cultural context, it is equally important to take note of its lasting legacy in the modern age—undoubtedly the result of its ability to adapt and change with its host culture. Korean shamanism, as one of the oldest and only prevailing native folk religions, has faced persistent persecution and disdain, even in the modern era. Of this, folk historian Kil-sŏng Ch’oe (1989) notes:

After World War II, Korea was thrown wide open to Western cultural influence and a polarization between those advocating modernization and those seeking the preservation of tradition developed, with the former advocating the discouragement of shamanism as ‘superstition’ inimical to progress and the latter tending to see in shamanism a mechanism for defending Korean culture from too heavy a dose of Westernization. (p. 218)

Despite a long history of being condemned as a fringe folk belief and oftentimes suffering from very real structural persecution, the long-term survival and influence of Korean shamanism is a testament to its cultural relevance and significance as a personal experiential tradition. In the modern era, shamanism continues to exist as an integral part of the culture in spite of the rapid spread of Christianity as a prevalent religion (Roibu and Roibu Crucianu, 2017, p. 238). For instance, during early modern Korea, the introduction of Anglo-American missionaries “paradoxically and liturgically” made it possible for Korean shamanism “and its spiritism, at the turn of the twentieth century, [to survive] by being included in Protestant missionary discourse on demonology” (Oak, 2010, p. 95). Korean shamanism is a resilient evolving practice that is closely woven into the fabric of Korean culture.

5. Diversity of Practice in Korean Shamanism

While the adaptability of Korean shamanism as a folk religion is a partial reason for its ensured survival in the modern age, another is its decentralized nature and wide range of practices and methods. One of the most notable regional differences in Korean shamanism is the type of rituals that are performed. In some regions, such as Jeju Island, shamanic rituals are more elaborate and involve the use of music, dance, and costumes. In other regions, such as Seoul, shamanic rituals are more subdued and may involve simply talking to the spirits or making offerings.

Another significant regional difference in Korean shamanism is in the role of the shaman. For example, variation in the path to becoming a shaman differs from north to south. In northern traditions, one usually becomes a shaman through divine intervention, as historian Elemire Zolla describes in his survey of the Korean shamanic tradition: “The call of a god is manifested through what Koreans term the ‘divine malady,’ which can be assuaged only by ritual and



Figure 2. Depiction of various ritual items.

cured only through initiation” (Zolla, 1985, p. 104). In contrast, in southern traditions, the title of shaman is usually strictly hereditary, “handed on from parents to children” (p. 104). The actions and responsibilities of the shaman differ by region as well. In some regions, such as the southern provinces of Gyeongsang and Jeolla, shamans are seen primarily as healers and intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. In other regions, however, such as the northern provinces of Gangwon and Hamgyeong, shamans are seen as more powerful and may be involved in performing exorcisms or cursing people (“Gut,” n.d.).

There are also regional differences in the worship of spirits throughout Korean shamanism. For example, in some regions, the focus is on ancestral spirits, while in other regions the focus is on natural spirits. There are also regional differences in the types of offerings that are made to spirits. Observing a ceremony conducted by a shamaness in Seoul, Grim writes that across various regions “similar spirit-personalities and ritual practices are evident but the names and manner of celebration of [gut] differ according to local

customs” (Grim, 1984, p. 236). Grim goes on to describe the ceremony in detail, demonstrating both the regional diversity of the shamanic tradition as well as the relatively decentralized aspect of these regional characteristics:

Joined by the chorus of apprentices with the musicians, [the shaman] sang exuberantly until she ceased singing to execute a series of dance steps with whirling movements, sudden knee bends and full body extensions by rising on the balls of her feet. Performed for the delight of the spirits, this elaborate dance and its accompanying music are singularly identified with Hwanghae Province in North Korea. (p. 242)

Here, Grim observes a North Korean style ritual taking place in Seoul, and the simultaneous preservation of stylistic elements of a shamanic legacy that continues south of the border. These kinds of ethnographic field studies are highly significant in their testimony as they serve to underscore the relatively high degree of aesthetic intersection in Korean shamanic rituals as well as their high degree of complexity.

Despite great regional variation, one constant remains: an almost theatrical level of performance that synthesizes religious aspects with highly developed visual and auditory semiotics. Indeed, what is at a glance a performance of superstition and folk belief is in reality “an elaborate musical event ... with almost constant vocal and instrumental accompaniment” (Park, 2003, p. 360). Korean shamanic rituals are uniquely artistic, communicative, and emotional (Walraven, 2009, p. 58-59). Varying Korean shamanic traditions are linked in their beauty, complexity, and emotion.

6. Korean Shamanism in the Modern Era

Grim’s exemplary work on documenting shamanic rituals and practices is from the 80s, but even after several decades, Korean shamanism remains a prevalent component of modern-day life. Korean shamans are still consulted by people from all walks of life today—from business people to celebrities—for help with health problems, relationship problems, and the grieving process. Shamans may perform rituals to attract good luck, remove curses, improve communication, resolve conflicts, and help people connect with the spirits of their deceased loved ones.

One possible explanation for the longevity of shamanism in Korean culture is its ability to be secular in nature. In many cases, business people may consult shamans not only to perform rituals ensuring their good fortune but also specifically to receive guidance on business decisions and auspicious dates for important transactions. This is a longstanding prevalent practice. Grim’s account of gut, for instance, provides an example of this kind of deeply secular reasoning for conducting a shamanic ceremony: “The ritual performance had been solicited by two entrepreneurs in the import-export business. Their rationale for sponsoring the [gut]-ceremony was to improve their faltering business by divining and propitiating the underlying causes of their recent lack of business success” (Grim, 1984, p. 236). In this way, shamanism is deeply ingrained into certain aspects of Korean life.

The sustained popularity of shamanism also manifests as a pop culture phenomenon. One of the most common ways that Korean shamanism is depicted in modern media is as a mysterious and dangerous practice. Shamans are often portrayed as able to cast spells, control the weather, and even see the future. In the popular imagination, shamans are at once representations of a long-gone, superstitious premodern past, but at the same time, they endure as contemporary cultural symbols. Another common way that Korean shamanism is depicted in modern media is as a source of humor. These types of depictions are regarded as harmful by some present-day mudang, as they trivialize an important religious tradition (Sarfati, 2023, p. 5). However, there are much more pragmatically negative depictions of shamans as well. In 2023, the popular Netflix show *The Glory* depicted instances in which characters turned to shamans and shamanic rituals, but ended up being tricked into prostitution. This depiction of shamans as deceptive scammers is common in contemporary popular culture, as there have unfortunately been incidents of high-profile fraud cases involving shamans in the modern age (Jung, 2023).

However, some modern films and television shows have portrayed shamanism as a source of healing and hope. For example, the 2012 film *The Housemaid* depicts a shaman helping a young woman escape from an abusive relationship. In recent years especially, there has been a markedly growing interest in Korean shamanism among Western audiences. This is due in part to the increasing popularity of Korean culture, as well as the growing interest in spirituality and alternative medicine in the Western hemisphere overall (Sarfati, 2023, p. 6).

7. Conclusion

One of the most noteworthy aspects of shamanism, and Korean shamanism in particular, is the fact that it is a living tradition that continues to evolve to this day. Korean shamanism is a vibrant and dynamic tradition that has helped shape Korean culture for centuries. Its legacy can be seen all throughout various aspects of Korean society, from the arts to the sciences. In the modern world, shamanism continues to adapt to new challenges, such as negative representations in media. However, shamanism offers a unique perspective on the world and a way to connect with something larger than oneself. For many Koreans, shamanism is a source of comfort and strength. It provides a way to deal with the challenges of everyday life and to find hope in the face of adversity. The enduring legacy of Korean shamanism is a testament to its power and its ability to speak to the human spirit. Future research on shamanism should focus on giving accurate depictions of current ritual practices from a firsthand point of view. In order to preserve this important traditional culture, further studies can delve into accounts of shamanistic rituals, interviews with shamans, and even analysis of shamanism's role in modern Korean culture.

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