

Sketching the basic concept of Korean Shamanism – Theology, Rituals, Societal value

Timo Schmitz

In traditional Korea, a female shaman is called *mu* or *mudang* (Fenkel, no year), giving Korean Shamanism the name *Muism*. A male shaman is called *paksu* (Schmitz 2017a: 3), however, like in Japan, women are rather designated as shamans, and women also prepare the rituals for their male kins (cp. Fenkel, no year). To become a shaman, one normally is possessed by a spirit. This process of possession is called *sinbyöng*, leading to the loss of oneself. Like in most shamanic traditions, the spirit inhabits the befallen person, which leads to physical symptoms and loss of self-control, as “the spirits have taken over that person’s mind” (Yang, 1988: 21). Therefore, one has to communicate with the spirit and receive him in a ceremony, the *naerim-kut*. The term *kut* in general means ‘ritual’ and describes all kind of rituals that might be performed by a shaman (Yang, 1988: 36). Other famous rituals include the *todang-kut* which is performed in Korean villages to ensure wealth for everybody, and the *ssitkim-kut* which is a ceremony to purify the soul of a deceased (cp. Mills, 2007). Yang points out that: “Since every charismatic *mudang* is believed to be spiritually connected with the gods, formal instruction is not considered necessary by the *mudang*. This way of thinking also means that every *kongsu* (message from the spirits through the *mudang*’s lips to the clients), every time of performance, every *mudang*’s methods, every customer’s reaction, every location, and every content of the ritual is unique” (1988: 23 f.). Anyways, everything has its cosmological order, since the theology of Korean shamanism is very profound. The ultimate being in traditional belief is the Heaven’s or God’s trinity: Hwanin, Hwanung, and Tangun (Schmitz, 2017a: 4). They are a manifestation of *Haneullim*, the Heavenly Emperor. The word *haneul* simply means heaven, and *nim* is an honorific suffix (Hong, 2008: 40), which can be compared to the Japanese suffixes of addressing people, such as ‘-san’. The word *haneulnim* is changed into *haneullim*, since an *l* and *n*, turn into a double *l* in Korean pronunciation. *Haneullim* is the High God in Korea (ibid.), or simply God, and thus the ultimate Being.

Despite the Highest Ultimate God, who symbolises Heaven, and his trinity form, there are several spirits, the most important being *kasin*, the faith into house spirits. The ancestral spirit is called *choryŏng* (cp. Garrigues, without year, who spells it *Joryeong*). The *jesa* is a ritual offering for the ancestors (Garrigues, without year). In addition, every family keeps a pot filled with rice called *chesŏk ogari*, as well as *mom ogari*, which are potteries that are accompanied with the *chesŏk ogari*. In addition, in several regions there is a strong faith in *samsin*, the goddess of childbirth (Lee, 2011: 262).

As can be seen, Korean shamanism has a very strongly developed theology. Though there are local variations of the spirits and spirits who have different functions, they all fit into a well-ordered cosmic image. The shaman works as medium between the spirit world and the human world or even further, the shaman loses his ego and is filled by the whole spirit, so that the people who search a shaman to get advise are not talking to the individual person anymore, but to the spirit who keeps hiding in the body. This leads to a conflict between the teacher who instructs the new shaman into the rituals and songs, and the new shaman himself who is now driven by the spirit's voice (cp. Yang, 1988: 24). In addition, shamanism decreased in the second half of the 20th century, due to the anti-superstitious policy in South Korea's military dictatorship phases, and it was just at about 2000, when shamanism attracted people's public attention again and experienced a boom in popular culture. In North Korea, shamanism is officially banned, however, the government found a way to integrate the superstition of the lower part of the population into its political agenda and formed its own religious movement in which the Kim dynasty is given the Heavenly Mandate and thus the rulership by God (Schmitz, 2017 [b]). Due to the strong isolatedness and remoteness of North Korea, not only the belief in shamanism stays strong, since it has no competition by modern religions, but also the traditions are given secretly to one and another shaman. In the South, shamanism becomes a popular phenomena and might be commercialised. Since the religious persecution which lasted for half a century wiped out almost all traditional shrines and holy monuments in South Korea, 'true' or 'pure' shamanism is mostly absent now and most of the traditions which were common to the South are lost. In addition, the social rank of shamans in South Korea remains poor. In North Korea, people are classified into 51 *songbuns*, shamans appear in category 29 (Collins, 2012: 79-81). Collins also points out: "In recent years, after having virtually eliminated religion in society, the regime found it useful to establish a handful of churches and Buddhist temples that are controlled by local security agencies and the Party. No one is fooled by this subterfuge. The sermons in these religious gatherings actually reinforce regime policies" (2012: 81). This also goes together with Schmitz (2017[b]) who pointed out that the government finances places of worship and organises societal gatherings near obelisks to keep the lower-educated people in line. Therefore, shamanism has to receive more attention in scientific

studies. At first, the study of original shamanistic cults has to be studied to be able to revive old traditions. Second, it has to be ensured that shamanism is not a victim of consumerism and that it will not be televangelised or put too much into commerce that it loses all its authenticity. Third, it has to be further studied, how officially sponsored shamanism influences political attitudes in North Korea. Korean shamanism is very important, since many Korean religious movements were founded in the last 200 years, which play an important role on the Korean peninsula until today. Most of them integrate shamanistic elements and some tried to modernize shamanism. As such, the study of shamanism will make it easier for us to make us understand socio-political movements and events of contemporary Korean history.

Literature:

Collins, Robert: Marked for Life – SONGBUN: North Korea's Social Classification System, Washington DC: The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012

Fenkel, Heinz Insu: Dancing on Knives – An Introduction to the Politics of Sexuality and Gender in Korean Shamanism, without year, <http://heinzinsufenkl.net/knives.html> (retrieved on 30 September 2017)

Garrigues, Stephen: Glossary of Terms in Korean Shamanism, without year, <http://shamanism.sgarrigues.net/glossary.html> (retrieved on 1 October 2017)

Hong, Sung-Wook: Naming God in Korea – The Case of Protestant Christianity, Oxford: Regnum, 2008

Lee, Ki-sang: Samsin Halmae's Reason of Sallimsari (Vivification), in: Heuer, Jung-Sun & Hong, Seong-Ha (eds.): Grenzgänge - Studien zur interdisziplinären und interkulturellen Phänomenologie, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011, pp. 259-296

Mills, Simon: Healing Rhythms - The World of South Korea's East Coast Hereditary Shamans, London/ New York: Routledge, 2007

Schmitz, Timo [a]: The Different Forms of Religion, self-published online article, 16 March 2017, <https://schmitztimo.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/the-different-forms-of-religion.pdf> (retrieved on 30 September 2017)

Schmitz, Timo [b]: The Red Banner philosophy as religious legitimation of the DPRK political apparatus in the civil life, self-published online article, 1 July 2017,

Journal of Ethnophilosophical Questions and Global Ethics – Vol. 1 (1), 2017

<https://schmitztimo.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/the-red-banner-philosophy-as-religious-legitimation.pdf> (retrieved on 1 October 2017)

Yang Jongsung: Korean Shamanism – The Training Process of Charismatic ‘Mudang’, Folklore Forum, Vol. 21 (1), 1988, pp. 20-40