

The Resilience of Shamanistic Practices: A Sociological Analysis on Modern Korean Society

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This paper uses the 2024 South Korean hit movie *Exhuma* as a central case through which to explore the persistence and possible strengthening of shamanistic beliefs and practices in modern South Korea. Clifford Geertz's concepts of cultural symbols and local knowledge are used with James Scott's description of cultural resistance as a framework for interpreting the evidence relating to the increasing popularity of shamanism in South Korea. The perceived value of these practices and their influence on decision-making in modern South Korea are explored through a review of the literature and references to shamanism in the media. This paper describes how perceived economic and social challenges among younger South Koreans are motivating a return to reliance on traditional shamanistic beliefs and practices as a form of unorganized resistance to the prevailing social and economic conditions of South Korea, fragmenting the hegemonic influence of rational free market capitalism.

Keywords: Shamanism; Shamanistic Practices; Korean Culture; Religion.

Introduction

Geertz and Scott: Symbolic Culture and Resistance

Geertz argued that “there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture”¹. For Geertz, culture is “not added on. . . to a finished or virtually animal” but “was ingredient and centrally ingredient in the production of that animal itself”². Furthermore, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”, and the analysis of culture is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning”³. Geertz described the search for meaning as a “thick description”⁴. Using Geertz's approach, it is arguable that the re-emergence of reliance on traditional shamanism in South Korea is not a move away from a universal standard of post-enlightenment rationality and capitalism. Instead, it is a return to what makes Koreans Korean. As shown through the long history and importance of shamanism in Korean culture, it can be argued that shamanism is an “ingredient” of the Korean identity. For Geertz, culture is symbolic, and we can interpret the symbols of culture to understand how people “communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.”⁵ Furthermore, the symbols that emerge in culture create shared meaning and experience⁶. However, shamanistic beliefs and activities exist in the shadows of Korean society. The vast majority of shamans act outside the norms and legislation of modern society. For example, less than 5

James Scott argued that “much of the politics of subordinate groups falls into the category of ‘everyday forms of resistance’” and “that these activities should most definitely be considered

political, that they do constitute a form of collective action, and that any account which ignores them is often ignoring the most vital means” of manifesting political interests⁷. He argued that “lower class resistance. . . is any act(s) by member(s) of the class that is (are) intended either to mitigate or to deny claims made on that class by superordinate classes”⁸. However, resistance is not limited to the lower classes. Instead, “resistance is virtually always a stratagem deployed by a weaker party in thwarting the claims of an institutional or class opponent who dominates the public exercise of power.”⁹ Scott argues that this type of resistance does not necessarily mean the resisters have revolutionary ideas or want direct confrontation, but “an ambiguous message is delivered by clearly identified messengers,” and “many of the folktales of peasant culture fall into this category” which can be understood as “disguised forms of aggression”; however, “because they are veiled. . . they do not offer the authorities a clear-cut occasion for retaliation.”¹⁰

History and Nature of Korean Shamanism

Archaeological evidence suggests the presence of religious beliefs on the Korean Peninsula dating back to before 1000 BC¹¹. However, the stories and rituals associated with Korean shamanism have been passed on to modern society in three ways, which have often modified or adapted older beliefs to fit the social and political requirements of the period: simple, syncretistic, and sublimated. The first form of transmission, simple, has been the passing on of shamanistic rituals and culture through person-to-person interaction, and across generations. Many of

the stories, ceremonies, and rituals that persist in rural areas of Korea today have been passed on through simple transmission over millennia and probably closely resemble or at least contain elements of the stories, ceremonies, and rituals from the distant past. The second form of transmission, syncretistic, is the absorption of shamanistic culture into the dominant belief systems that arrived on the Korean Peninsula from external sources: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. Today, early forms of Korean shamanistic practices can be seen in the practice of these belief systems. Finally, through sublimated transmission Korean shamanism merged with other systems of cultural practice and belief to create something new¹².

The Korean government describes how “in ancient Korea, they had shamanistic rituals to worship ancestral and celestial gods,” with most “being farming or hunting ceremonies offering prayers or showing gratitude for a good harvest”¹³. Traditionally, the rituals were divided between two types of shamans, the possessed shaman, who was believed to have been selected by the spirit world and showed this selection through mental and physical abnormalities, for example, fainting or fits. The second type of shaman was a hereditary position, passed on through generations. Throughout recorded Korean history, the shamans have performed rituals called “gut”. The shaman performs the role of a bridge between the human world and the spirit world. To act as a bridge, the shaman initiates the ritual with “songs of origin”, and this form of music and singing can still be seen in modern performances of what is described as traditional Korean theater and music as “pansori”¹⁴.

Core Beliefs

There are three fundamental concepts that persist at the core of shamanistic thinking in Korea: the existence of a spirit world, animism, and geomancy. In Korean shamanism, the spirit world is populated by deceased ancestors who can communicate with shamans. Animism is the belief in a vast number of gods that exist as part of the natural world and influence natural processes. Geomancy is the belief in flows of energy through the natural world which can either be in harmony with human behavior and creations, creating positive effects for human experience, or negative effects with disharmony. The role of interacting with these aspects of shamanistic reality and acting as a conduit between the spirit world and the human world is held by the Korean shaman, known in Korean as “mudang”, and it is estimated that among South Korea’s population of around fifty-three and a half million people, at least three hundred thousand identify as a shaman¹⁵.

Although Korean shamanism recognizes the existence of a spirit world and the existence of various gods and spirits, the interaction with the spirit world is motivated by solving problems in this life, rather than speculating about the conditions or experience of an afterlife. Shamans may interact with the

spirits of the dead, but this is only to solve the problems of spirits who have not passed fully into the spirit world because of a problem they are experiencing in this reality. It is the duty of descendants of the deceased to solve any problem that the ancestor spirit is suffering and facilitate their peaceful passing into the spirit world fully. Shamans offer services to the living to help remove such problems. Alongside the spirits of the deceased, Korean shamanism practices a belief in animism, or the existence of spirits in all things. Scholars have suggested that the “objects” that contain spirits can be divided into three distinct groups: the objects of nature, objects manufactured by people, and the objects of the shaman’s shrine. Examples of the objects of nature include but are not limited to “the heaps of stones, trees, rocks, and springs” whose “resident deities” are “invoked for inspiration”¹⁶. Examples of manufactured objects include “sheets of paper, calabashes, whisks of straw, earthen pots, and garments”¹⁷. These manufactured items are “placings for spirit presence or as their vehicles”¹⁸. Finally, the objects of the shaman’s shrine are used in rituals and “make the gods a performative presence” during the rituals¹⁹. Finally, geomancy plays an important role in the perception of Korean shamanism, with its significance repeatedly present in major historical episodes and behind the decisions of many modern Koreans, both among the general population and people in positions of power.

Korean geomancy is known as “pungsu” in Korean, and literally means “wind and water”. Korean shamanism includes the belief that the energy of the earth flows and can either be in balance or out of balance. Believers in pungsu will consult with practitioners who assess a site for the flow of its energy and its suitability for a range of uses from temples and palaces for royalty to the grave sites and business locations for commoners. One of the most famous examples of the use of pungsu in Korean history was the decision by the 15th century King Taejo to consult practitioners on the location and design of Changdeokgung, a palace at the heart of Seoul. UNESCO recognizes the importance of pungsu, with the palace’s “adaptation to the natural terrain” distinguishing it “from conventional palace architecture”²⁰.

Methodology

The nature of shamanistic beliefs and practices in South Korea means very little empirical evidence exists on the subject, and given the shame often associated with belief in what are seen as backward superstitions, very few people are willing to talk openly and seriously about their beliefs. The international popularity of *Exhuma* could partially be explained by the insight it provides into this rarely discussed aspect of Korean culture.

This paper reviews the existing academic literature and media reports on shamanism since 2010. *Exhuma* is used as a guide to themes and practices and the movie is analyzed alongside the

literature to create what Geertz calls a “thick” description of the culture. The research focused on English language sources to make the material accessible to an international audience. In line with Geertz, no attempt is made to force the meaning into a generalizable theory. Instead, the paper explores how shamanism acts as a symbol of resistance in South Korean culture. A connection is made between modern economic difficulty for young South Koreans and the re-emergence of shamanism as a form of non-organized resistance against an economic system that creates and imposes inequality.

***Exhuma* and Shamanism as Resistance**

Exhuma was released in February 2024 and more than 11 million of the population of 52 million in South Korea had seen the movie by the start of April²¹. The plot depicts various aspects of traditional shamanism and how they are used in modern Korean society. The satisfaction of ancestors, the ability to communicate with spirits, and the forecasting of individual fortune or destiny were instantly recognizable to Korean audience members but almost entirely unfamiliar to international viewers, even those with extensive experience in South Korea²². Since the Korean War (1950-53), South Korea has rapidly evolved from one of the poorest populations on Earth to one of the richest, with internationally competitive and leading technology conglomerates and an education system that is consistently ranked as one of the best in the world²³. The rapid development of South Korea often disguises the reliance on deep traditional shamanistic superstitions that have often been relied upon as a form of resistance to powerful outsiders and oppression within Korea.

It is thought that Korean shamanism has persisted for over two thousand years in Korean culture, but a powerful reemergence began when external political pressure began to be exerted by imperial Japan in the late 19th century. Korea had been labeled the “Hermit Kingdom” for its reluctance to open up to the outside world and trade and interact with other cultures throughout the 19th century, but when external pressure increased to the point that Korea had no choice but to start opening up, there was a nativist reaction. A significant example of the turbulence of the time was the Donghak Movement, led by Choe Je-u. The Donghak Movement is a major example of the syncretic transmission of Korean shamanism. “Donghak” translates literally as “Eastern Learning”, but the movement replicated Catholic beliefs and practices, such as baptism, at the same time as incorporating Buddhist, Daoist, and native Korean shamanistic beliefs^{24,25}. For example, a major belief in Korean shamanism is that the individual who acts with the flow of energy in the universe will have peace, whereas an individual who contradicts the flow of such energy will suffer²⁶. The participants in the Donghak Rebellion, which led to the first Sino-Japanese War and eventually the end of the 500 year old Joseon Dynasty, were motivated by the shamanistic belief that the harmony of Korea

was being disrupted by outside influence and the corruption of its ruling class²⁷.

Later, following the end of the Korean War and for most of the second half of the twentieth century, under the autocratic rule of military leaders who aimed to rapidly modernize the South Korean economy and society, “shamanism was deemed irrational and a hindrance to rationality and modernization²⁸.” In the 1970s under President Park Chung Hee, the New Community Movement and the Anti-Superstition Movement were initiated, during which “the police and local religious and socio-cultural leaders persecuted and suppressed shamanistic cults. Many shamanic shrines were burned down, shamans were arrested and sacred trees and the jangseung - totem pole-like guardians were physically destroyed²⁹.” The suppression of traditional shamanistic beliefs and practices during the autocratic period would, under the democratic movement of the later 1980s, lead to a renewed interest in the Korean identity and freedoms associated with its practice³⁰.

Rationale

The question then arises: why has there been a resurgence in belief and practices associated with Korean shamanism in recent years? This paper argues that the economic difficulties facing the younger Korean generations have created a mindset of resistance against economic inequality. This resistance is expressed through increased interest in and association with the symbols of traditional shamanism, which undermine the rational understanding of success and failure in a society and economy of free market capitalism. The significance of the trend is that in recent South Korean history, the reemergence of shamanistic beliefs and practices has been associated with deep social unrest, as during the Donghak Movement and resistance against Japanese Imperialism. The aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which shamanistic beliefs and practices have re-emerged and apply the theoretical framework of cultural symbolism and how it relates to resistance in the Korean context. Although the aim is a general overview, the research is limited by the reluctance of many Koreans to publicly discuss their beliefs in what is widely seen as a backward and parochial set of practices.

Cause and Pervasiveness

Economic Uncertainty and the Comfort of Shaman

Despite the economic boom of that late 20th century, the highly competitive South Korean economy has recently been given the nickname “Hell Joseon”, incorporating the dynastic name of Korea until the 20th century. Calling Korea Joseon “alludes to a regressive society where the inheritance of status is almost fully institutionalized”³¹. Young people in Korea today feel that their economic futures and opportunities for progress are

limited to the extent that they feel hopeless. This uncertainty has become the foundation of the increased interest in shamanistic consultations and activities. In 2022, the Korean government estimated that there are between 300,000 and 400,000 shamans actively working in South Korea³². At the higher end of the estimate, that is one shaman for every 130 people in South Korea. For comparison, the Korean Psychological Association is South Korea's oldest and most well-known organization for professionals working in the field of psychology, and as of 2024 it has 23,000 members³³. Korea's rapid economic growth in the 20th century has become known as the miracle on the Han, referring to the river that flows through central Seoul. Over decades, autocratic rule directed the Korean people's efforts to only one goal: achieving rapid economic advancement through relentless industrial modernization while sacrificing individual freedom and expression.

A strictly organized and work-based culture emerged under autocratic rulers, with a singular drive for self-improvement through education and material gains. Over decades, the competitiveness of this culture has shaped modern Korean culture into one of the most intense and competitive in the world. The desire to show success in this society has led to phenomena such as the "Kimchi Premium". The demand for luxury products in South Korea is so high that people are willing to pay a premium over and above the price of luxury products in other developed countries³⁴. The extreme competitiveness can also be seen in Korean education culture, in which children of all ages study for twelve hours every day and the stress often leads to mental health issues, including a high rate of youth suicide³⁵.

In this context of extreme competition, shamanism offers a reassuring connection to something outside of the educational and economic system. Shamans offer comfort and guidance to people who feel lost in the hyper-capitalist system. They offer explanations and hope for life events, removing the rationality of personal responsibility. *Exhuma* opens with the story of a wealthy family who consult a shaman to explain the illness of their newborn son. The family's struggle despite their material success could be interpreted as a realization of the empty promises of unrestrained capitalism. Their wealth and the rules they play by in normal society cannot help them, so they return to the culture that Geertz would argue is a deep part, or ingredient, of their identity. The reliance on shamanism for help against ill-fortune pervades South Korean society. On the island of Jeju, 82 km off the south coast, diving women harvest seafood and products without breathing equipment, and collect their harvest with their hands, carrying on the fishing methods of their ancestors. To bring good fortune and safety to their diving season, they pay for shamanistic rituals³⁶. *Exhuma* shows the request for good fortune in return for a payment or offering has again become attractive to all parts of South Korean society. Although it is difficult to establish exact numbers due to the sense of embarrassment associated with relying on this

ancient practice, the South Korean media regularly refers to attempts by students, politicians, sports stars, entertainers, and business people to improve their fortunes through shamanistic practices³⁷. Shamans have quickly understood the root cause of many of the complaints of their clients, and have adapted to offer advice that is "of attempting to exert some control over seemingly arbitrary market motion" and "addresses the world of struggling entrepreneurs through the appearances of officials and spirit warriors of business"³⁸. Recently, a conflict between two of the biggest music labels in the country has become public, revealing the level of shamanism's influence across South Korean society. BTS's agency HYBE, revealing that the owner of a subsidiary, ADOR, had been "coached by a female shaman to decide on major company management matters including the military services of BTS members" and "options such as establishing a joint venture, stock options and setting up a new label."³⁹ The shaman "claimed that she is in a trance state" and "embodies the spirit" of a relative of the subsidiary owner⁴⁰.

As described earlier, Geertz argued that the symbols of culture reveal the "ingredients" that make the people. In the context of South Korea, the return to shamanism can be interpreted as a return to a core ingredient of "Koreaness" as a rejection of the argument that capitalist success requires rationality. Koreans seem to feel that the promises of capitalism do not meet their needs for reassurance and comfort. The system of material wealth that has developed does not fulfill them. In line with Scott's arguments about resistance, the return to the irrationality of shamanism can be interpreted as a form of unorganized resistance against the idea that capitalism and material wealth are routes to satisfaction. Frustration and mistrust of Western forms of materialism seem to be motivating a subversive return to other systems of thought that explain success and failure in a different way.

Fortune-Telling and Health

As part of this turn to shamanism, South Koreans are increasingly turning to ancient belief systems related to animism and geomancy. It is estimated that the fortune-telling industry in South Korea is now worth \$3.7 billion⁴¹. In cities, towns, and rural areas, fortune tellers set up small stalls and shops advertising their skills and offer advice on relationships, careers, and business. The practitioners mix Korean belief systems and the non-Korean style use of tarot cards and other internationally recognized forms of practice related to superstition and spiritual belief. Beyond this extremely common, everyday activity, the reliance on shamanistic practices becomes more specialized with the use of shamans who are recognized as either possessed or hereditary.

The reliance on shamanism for fortune has deep roots in Korean culture. In the late 19th century, an English language newspaper reported that an:

”outrageous custom in Korea is that when a person is sick, either a blind man or a sorceress is called in to beat drums, sing songs, and wail out prayers to drive away the evil spirit⁴².”

With the arrival of Christianity and the rationalism of the West, shame and embarrassment began to be associated with the customs and traditions of Korea’s ancient past. Soon after the start of the opening of Korean society to outsiders, however, the atrocity and tragedy of Japanese imperialism invaded the peninsula. For modern South Koreans, fortune-telling seems to play the same subversive role as the return to shamanism did at the end of the Joseon Dynasty and under Japanese Imperialism. Future prospects and medical care share the characteristic of being influenced by a hierarchy of access connected to wealth, but shamanism undermines that hierarchy and offers people who feel that they do not have the wealth to ensure opportunity and health, a way of subverting the arguments of capitalism that the best and brightest rise to the top. Shamanism offers explanations based on uncontrollable factors such as spirits and fortune which remove the pressure and stress associated with the competition and status of capitalism.

Conclusion

Today, South Korea is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, with an exceptionally high standard of living. Despite this modernity, ancient forms of shamanism persist, with many people not only being familiar with concepts that are thousands of years old but also believing them to have some form of power and relying on them. This paper aimed to create the foundation for further research on the participation in shamanistic practices as a form of non-organized resistance to the globalization of Korean culture, with its relentless focus on economic and social competition under globalized capitalism.

Understanding the ancient systems of shamanism and how they influence modern South Korea is necessary and important. Undoubtedly, the importance of shamanism is increasing, not fading, as more and more young people turn to the shamans for advice and guidance. This form of local knowledge provides insight into Korean culture, but this paper is limited by its aim to create a general overview. The limited sources on the subject also increase the possibility that bias has been introduced to the analysis, as information on shamanism that is published to a general audience in newspapers and online sources often does not include the views of practitioners or believers, due to the long-standing negative social perceptions of shamanism. Further research could address this bias by focusing on the views of people who practice or rely on shamanism. Qualitative interviews or surveys would also be the next stage in developing a clearer understanding of how far the turn to shamanism is part of the rejection of the current economic system. Another

weakness is the selection of sources, with very little material existing on shamanism and its followers, as by its nature the subject is mostly treated as deeply private. Furthermore, very little information exists on the practices of shamanism in modern South Korea. A survey of practices to establish exactly what is happening, regional variations in practice, and how South Korean people perceive these practices is required. It is also possible that shamanism has been commodified by the economic system in South Korea. No research could be found on this subject and could become the basis of further research.

Despite these weaknesses, the review of the literature and media sources has provided a framework for understanding the increasing popularity of shamanism in South Korea and has shown the correlation between increasing dissatisfaction with the current economic and social system and shamanism’s role as a symbol of non-organized resistance.

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