

Korean Shamanism, Digitization, and Religious Stigma

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Abstract

This sociology paper reviews journal articles and texts on Korean shamanism (*musok*) and its digitization with the aim of understanding how technology can combat religious stigma. Shamanism, a folk religion core to South Korea's identity, is often deemed superstition in modern day. Therefore, this paper uses the northern type of shaman (*gangshinmu*)—a figure of literal and social mobility—as well as shaman paintings and other practices to explain the ways in which digitization, typically regarded as an enemy of tradition, can normalize and destigmatize shamanism.

Keywords

Behavioral and Social Sciences; Sociology and Social Psychology; Korean Shamanism; Digitization; Religious Stigma.

Introduction

As a folk religion, Korean shamanism (*musok*) is significant to the development of South Korean culture—specifically, sentiments regarding mental health and spirituality. The religion dates back to Korea's founding and has faced repression by various powers throughout history, yet proves resilient amid sociopolitical shifts. Korean shamans (*mudang*) are considered mediums between humans and the inhuman forces that help them cope with everyday challenges; a typical shaman is a woman who performs musical rituals to evoke benevolent gods and exorcise evil spirits. There are two types of shaman: "[The] *gangshinmu* [northern type] [is] a private being/independent shaman [who] works freely everywhere, but *seseupmu* [southern type] can work only in his/her district."¹ As northern shamans can work anywhere and everywhere, they have naturally become more popular than southern shamans. This flexibility will inform the rest of the paper, as tradition often adapts to technology when push comes to shove.

Like other areas of modern life, Korean shamanism faces rapid urbanization, and with it, changes in values which contribute to stigmatization. Thus, this paper examines the ways in which shamanism itself has changed in light of these shifts. People from all walks of life consult shamans when making decisions regarding health, wealth, and the like; in response to modern needs, shamans have started using digital media and platforms to maximize their client base. This adaptation calls authenticity into question, as some believe "[...] shamans practicing today are as mercenary as many other members of competitive late industrial South Korean society."² However, expecting payment for services does not necessarily mean one is inauthentic. Shamanism has always been a balancing act, as shamans evoke gods by offering various objects as vessels, the most common type being shaman paintings. Like northern shamans, these paintings embody flexibility in their transition from physical (paintings) to symbolic (vessels for chosen gods). Thus, when a client consults a shaman, they are choosing to "buy into" what the shaman is selling (faith) as they would any professional. When traditions change, they are often seen as inauthentic, but the core of shamanism—connection, comfort formed through spiritual guidance—remains the same regardless of medium (traditional or digital).

Contrary to popular belief, the mobility of northern shamans, shaman paintings, and shamanic rituals establish digitization as a way to maintain authenticity. Shamanism continues to exist regardless of sociopolitical opposition—navigating conflicts of tradition and innovation, threat and potential. Such contradictions have led to life-changing technology, and with this technology, shamans are finding new ways of archiving knowledge and engaging with clients. Despite the progressive nature of digitization (as in, its willingness to change and adapt), it evokes questions of conservation. For example, most shamans are women. Thus, questions of *who* among these women are equipped to conserve tradition and *which* traditions are worth conserving can shed light on larger power dynamics. The founding of shamanism completely redefined the role of women in religion, giving them a means of authority in the face of patriarchy. This paper keeps all of these ideas in mind while exploring the role of digitization in keeping shamanism alive.

Discussion

In studying the relationship between Korean shamanism, digitization, and religious stigma, education is key to clarifying the *core* of shamanism—connection. Some scholars believe religion is *not* fixed, but rather an ever-changing product of popular consciousness; for example, while an older South Korea would have been more threatened by illness, modern Korea is vulnerable to the rampant scams of rapid urbanization.³ Likewise, the function of Korean gods can change with time; for example, Sinjang, a god with exorcistic powers, has slowly become a god favorable to business.⁴ The gods evoked by shaman paintings “[...] are not transcendent beings who inhabit a realm of philosophical abstractions [...] These are gods who address human needs in the secular world.”⁵ In other words, the gods change as modern needs do. As for humans, the artists behind older shaman paintings tended to be non-shamans—their anonymity creating an intimate, almost parasocial bond between portrait and viewer (and by extension, god and viewer). While the word “parasocial” is often associated with modern content creators, it can be applied to any impersonal relationship. In this case, a shaman’s client is meant to feel a spiritual connection through the shaman despite not sharing work experiences. This core value transcends personal experiences as it does the digitization of paintings and other media.

In Korea, the stigma surrounding shamanism is rooted in the acceptability of fate: “[...] fortune-telling or *jeom*, along with ritualistic and healing functions, has always been one of the most important functions of shamans, and their ‘talent’ has always been highly regarded and frequently patronized by the masses throughout history.”⁶ Despite this patronage, stigma is difficult to combat, especially when grounded in history: During Japan’s colonial rule over Korea, ‘secular’ Shinto became equated with national ‘duty’ and ‘teachings,’ while folk religions like shamanism were deemed ‘superstition.’⁷ In modern day, “superstitious” practices like fortune-telling are readily available at public venues. Fortune-telling also takes the form of electronic amulets and mobile apps, with shamans counselling clients in everyday woes.⁸ As for musical rituals or *kut*, they are “[...] performed for two purposes: entertainment and efficacy. [...] entertainment for [both gods and] human participants.”⁹ In addition to Japanese influence, shamanism has been stigmatized for its supposed lack of modern application—but just as technology changes with time, *mixed* ritual styles exist and evoke further discussion of authenticity. Some scholars and shamans argue this mixing is inauthentic, but the argument itself reinforces transformation as a natural part of shamanism. After all, transformation can be equally entertaining and enlightening. While the digital age seemingly threatens tradition, it also has the potential to extend its reach in positive ways.

Literature Review 1: Kwang Suk Yoo

This paper’s first focus of review is Kwang Suk Yoo’s journal article “Evolutionary Adaptation of Korean Divination to Religious Markets: A Case Study of Three Divination Communities in the Seoul Metropolitan Area”—which explores how divination adapts in different communities (Miari, Apkujöng, and Suwön). Since the end of Japan’s colonial rule, the South Korean government has attempted to both eliminate and endorse shamanism. Although the government suppressed shamanism in the early 1960s, it later endorsed shamanism as a staple of Korean culture.¹⁰ With this in mind, the continued existence of divination communities like those of Miari, Apkujöng, and Suwön is unsurprising. Divination materials such as shaman paintings share this history of secrecy. In the past, some suppliers ran shaman shops known as “purveyors of all kinds of things” (*manmulsang*).¹¹ These shops sold Buddhist paraphernalia as a smokescreen due to an overlap in products; for example, Korean drums are used in both folk art performances and shamanic rituals.¹² In modern day, these shops continue to exist and elicit varying levels of respect.

When Japanese authorities discredited Korean shamanism as “superstitious,” it was an attempt to rationalize colonization as modernization. After the colonial period, Western beliefs were introduced to Korea and the position of shamanism was left uncertain. While the link between shamanism and superstition remains, shamanism has since been linked to new discourse regarding tradition and innovation. With that said, Yoo’s work proves divination is thriving in places like Miari, Apkujöng, and Suwön. If shamanic practices and products need to be repackaged, they do so to survive the religious marketplace. In certain cases, this repackaging works both ways: According to a sociological survey analyzing potential links between religious and sociopolitical beliefs, “Buddhism deified Sanshin (the Mountain God) and Chilsung (the Spirit of the Seven Stars) of Shamanism and set up shrines in their honor on temple complexes in order to win wide support.”¹³ Overall, Korean practitioners of shamanism, as well as Buddhism and Christianity, are alike in that they link faith to prosperity (health, wealth, etc.). Furthermore, they find ways to coexist, to reconcile past and present. Outside of shamanism, traditions such as *capping* (“[...] in which the long, uncut hair of boys about to be married was put up and twisted into the adult’s topknot”) and *weddings* (which are often replaced with “new-style weddings” in rented

wedding halls, rather than bridal homes) have changed to suit modern needs.¹⁴ In this case, “needs” comprise *immediate* changes in lifestyle (such as moving from one’s ancestral home and with it, local traditions) and *accumulative* changes (such as perception of gender roles). With that said, it isn’t a leap in logic to say shamanism also has the potential to reconcile past and present successfully.

Literature Review 2: Liora Sarfati

This paper’s second focus of review is Liora Sarfati’s work—specifically, her journal article “Shifting Agencies through New Media: New Social Statuses for Female South Korean Shamans” and text *Contemporary Korean Shamanism: From Ritual to Digital*. Sarfati’s text claims the internet is “far less supervised than television, film, and media and allows *mansin* [the largest regional sub-type of shaman] a relaxed arena in which to express their opinions.”¹⁵ Again, the core of shamanism is connection, an idea which easily applies to the internet and its ever changing flow of information. With this in mind, shamans’ “[...] use of the internet has become a marker of their professional standing [...] Financial prosperity, personal taste, and knowledge of digital media are key factors in the choice of internet platform and scope of online activity.”¹⁶ Unlike the anonymity surrounding older shaman paintings, shamans are starting to embrace content creation as public figures.

Building on these ideas, it is possible to link the digitization of shamanism to changes in South Korean society as a whole. Not only do digital media and platforms expand the availability of shamanic services, but they affect power dynamics within secular and spiritual society. Stigma very much exists *within* the shaman community, and digitization drives a further wedge between practitioners. However, with the rising popularity of shamans on the internet, shamanic hierarchy can slowly disappear, and a more democratic society can take its place. On one hand, some may claim digitization will lead to greater commercialization (and depreciation) of traditions; on the other hand, digitization is what spares practices and symbols from oblivion. Through the posting of rituals, stories, and teachings online, shamans can archive their knowledge for the future. Since younger generations are more familiar with the internet than real-life shamanism, they are more likely to view shamanic practices online. Perhaps, digitization can go so far as to elicit appreciation for the “archaic” religion across the globe. Exposure is a form of education, and education can lead the fight against stigmatization.

Conclusion

While some scholars and shamans believe Korean shamanism will be forever impeded by its history of colonization and non-political opposition, digitization promises sustainability. As society becomes increasingly digital, traditions are often viewed as relics of the past, burdened by skepticism. However, this paper has argued that digitization offers a unique opportunity to preserve core values while adapting to contemporary demands. The flexibility of northern shamans and shaman paintings, as well as the growing presence of shamanic rituals online, demonstrate tradition *can* coexist with innovation. By embracing technology, shamanism can reach a broader audience and challenge the stigma that has long surrounded it. While this paper only scratches the surface of the complex relationship between shamanism, digitization, and religious stigma, it envisions a future where traditional practices are not just preserved but revitalized in new, meaningful ways. The path forward for Korean shamanism lies in its ability to adapt and evolve, using digitization as a tool for connection and continuity.

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