"Korean Shamanism: Religious Syncretism in Early Korean Dynasties"

Introduction

In modern-day Korea, it is customary for men and women alike to visit shamans to partake in elaborate rituals, the billowing, colorful sleeves of the shaman whispering along to the rhythmic, energetic beat that guides her movements. The people who visit shamans are most often ordinary citizens, not extremely wealthy, and likely to seek assistance with an everyday event, such as dealing with a move, a new job, or a family member's illness. Since the archaic period, Korea's shaman culture has captivated the minds and hearts of Koreans and has since remained a "religion of the common people." Why do so many Koreans today continue to practice and believe in it? As a democratic religion, Shamanism remains a central part of public life in Korea, as it has throughout its history.

As Shamanism traditionally centered around the rituals[1] and powers of female shamans in particular,[2] it offered vulnerable and oppressed individuals the promise of power and good fortune, aspects that are especially appealing to people in Korea today. In Shamanistic traditions, the ability to persuade gods to adhere to one's wishes was an essential source of power among shamans and was the source of meaning in all of their rituals. [3] Shamanistic ceremonies "invited the gods, entertained them, listened to their will, and obeyed them."[4] The power of these ancient Shamanistic rituals[56] remained embedded in the Korean psyche, so much so that the religions that followed—Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—retained elements of them. When Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity were newly introduced to Korea, they compromised and absorbed ritualistic aspects of Shamanism in order to be accepted by the Korean population.[7] Although Shamanism would face extreme stigmatization as a controversial "superstition" throughout history, its beliefs intertwined with the dogmas of competing religious systems throughout the Silla (57 B.C.-676 A.D.), Koryo (935-1392 CE), and Joseon dynasties (1392-1910).

Buddhism first entered Korea in 369,[8] as a pre-established religion with origins in India. After Buddhism was adopted in the early sixth century, it was officially patronized by Silla royalty; it remained a religion of the social elite before it transformed into the popular Wonhyo Buddhist Movement.[9] The shape Buddhism took in Korea was different from Indian Buddhism, partly because it was both competing with[10] and adapting to Shamanism. When Buddhism was first introduced to South Korea, it gained popular support because of its relative similarities to Shamanism. Yet unlike Shamanism, which relied on rituals to relieve suffering, Buddhist monks could theoretically explain pain, sickness, and death as part of the human condition.[11] And like Shamanism, which offered herbal remedies, incantations, and rituals to relieve illnesses, Buddhist monks had spiritual healing powers—and even borrowed from shaman costumes[12] and rituals. [13] Although Buddhism remained a prominent and sanctioned religion[14] throughout the Silla and Koryo dynasties, the simultaneous rise of Taoism in the Koryo dynasty was yet another return to Shamanistic beliefs.

Taoism officially entered Korea in 624 with the Chinese preacher Laozi, who introduced its mythic philosophy. Taoism appealed to early Korea largely because of its mysticism, which was popular throughout the Koryo and Paekche Kingdoms. [15] As Taoist ceremonies included prayers for rain or healing,[16] thunder magic,[17] and purification,[18] it contained natural overlaps with Shamanism, a folk religion that could trace its roots all the way back to Siberian tribes,[19] who, like the Taoists, practiced elaborate rainmaking festivals. As Shamanism offered stability

and harmony through rituals when interacting with the natural world, it overlapped with the public, deity-worshiping ceremonies popular in Taoism. Although Taoism was never as established as the institution of Buddhism, it created a link between Korea's indigenous beliefs and the developing religious practices that would shape Korea's ancient religious landscape.

Although Buddhism and Confucianism entered Korea around the same time,[20] Confucianism did not gain a stronghold in Korea until the Joseon dynasty. The Chinese-originating ideology aligned with Korea's cultural values of respecting elders and social roles, contributing to its rapid spread. Just before the Joseon dynasty, Confucianism and Buddhism took on complementary roles in Korean society: while Buddhism offered an answer to spiritual needs, Confucianism built a foundation for statesmanship.[21] As Buddhism offered spiritual, mystical answers to ordinary questions, Confucianism introduced a strict hierarchy and social reform[22] which represented the interests of the elite *yangban* (upper) class. Confucianism especially appealed to Korean officials, as it enforced a bureaucratic state and acted as a substitute for Buddhist philosophy, [23] whose rhetorical insights into the nature of suffering were of less interest to statecraft.

Confucianism also deeply conflicted with Shamanism throughout its religious messages. While Shamanism focused on seeking the powers of gods and spirits to satisfy individual desires, Confucianism focused on personal ethics, morality, and maintaining social harmony. Despite the fact that kings in the Joseon dynasty attempted to force out shamanism, the two religions still fulfilled different roles in Korean society. Yet while Shamanism addressed the everyday concerns of the lower class, lending power to its female shamans, Confucianism offered a patriarchal system that viewed shamans as "scheming, lewd, divisive, and immoral." [24] Although the Joseon dynasty was an "anti-Buddhist era," it simultaneously suppressed Shamanism. At the same time, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism engaged in a process of "mutual sharing" and "diversification" [25] that managed to keep Shamanism alive during and after the Joseon dynasty.

The religious overlaps between Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism were inevitable. Although the religious systems were very different—Confucianism focused on rationality and was unable to deal with abstract matters, such as life after death, while Buddhism was a religion that was challenging for poor and uneducated people to understand.[26] Shamanism, on the other hand, not only did not discriminate against women but worshipped gods *and* goddesses, offering people assets they could appreciate in their lifetimes, such as wealth and health.[27] As Shamanism remained a religion of the common people, its ritualistic properties and healing practices found their way into Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—because if they did not, none of the religions would have been acceptable or familiar to everyday Koreans.

In history, "lower culture" is often responsible for continuing traditions and cultures, as it did with Korean Shamanism. [28] As people with lower positions in society struggle to endure the pain of structural inequalities, religions like Shamanism offer them a way out, instilling meaning in their daily activities and rituals. Although Shamanism was never a religion of the scholarly elite, like Taoism, Confucianism, or Buddhism, it remains an inimitable force in contemporary South Korea today, especially so to women and those less financially fortunate.

This paper explores the plethora of religions that characterized Korea's early history—and their similarities and dissimilarities. As Shamanism merged with the origins of Korean mythology, it cemented itself as the first, and most influential, religion of Korea. Despite the religious and political tensions between Shamanism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, the insuppressible nature of Shamanism revealed that it could, and had to, coexist with other

religions. As Arevik Khachaturian argues, "Historically, Korean civilization has been primarily shaped by Shamanistic beliefs after influences of the ideologies of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and lately Christianity have been observed."[29] If Shamanism pre-dates Korean civilization, this paper aims to study: i) How have the ritualistic and ideological principles of Shamanism transcended into Korea's subsequent religious traditions? ii) What role did changing societal influences—from concepts of gender to family life—have in attempting to suppress Shamanism? iii) How is the persistence of Shamanism intertwined with Korea's early class, gender, and political spheres? From a historical perspective, this paper aims to address what Shamanism was, exactly, and how it became integral to the everyday lives and concerns of the common people. In many ways, Shamanism was, and is, a "layman's religion"—and the story of its existence cannot be separated from the history of Korea's other religions. In Korea's religious history, to study one religion is to understand another. As Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism simultaneously suppressed and borrowed from Shamanism, the syncretism of beliefs throughout the Silla, Koryo, and Joseon dynasties contributed to the continuity of Korean Shamanism as a lasting cultural force.

The Origins of Shamanism

The origins of Shamanism are mythic and complex because of the nature of its spread. As Shamanism existed in different forms throughout Korea's provinces, it is difficult to identify its original form.[30] It is, however, traceable: although Shamanism does not contain written doctrines or records, it is linked to the myth of Tangun[31] and the creation of Korea and its first king. The Myth of Tangun describes an all-powerful God who travelled from heaven to earth.[32] When the God married the mother of the earth, the union resulted in the birth of Dangun, the son of God, who went on to symbolize the creation of a new civilization and a new nation: Korea.[33] As Shamanism was linked to the foundation of Korea, its development remained connected to the idea that the first shaman was descended from Tangun—and the gods—themselves. Shamans were thus associated with great power and divinity, thanks to their otherworldly origins. Although in the Joseon dynasty, shamans would later be linked to the lower class, the myths associated with Shamanism suggest that shamans transcended hierarchical class boundaries with their deity-given power. At times, Shamans and kings were even believed to be one and the same.[34]

The legends surrounding Shamanism encapsulated the divine power and authority of shamans. As the myth of Bupui-Whasang states,

> There was a man known as Bupui-Whasang in Kowumchun temple on [Mount] Chiri. One day he took a walk at leisure. Suddenly he saw a mountain torrent without rain. Thinking where the flood originated, he looked up the peak of Heavenly King. There he saw a tall and strong woman, who called herself the Holy Mother of Heavenly King. She became a human being and married to him according to the divination performed through water. They bore eight girls who were taught various techniques of shamanism, and taught to praise the Amida Buddha and call upon the name of Bupui-Whasang. They later spread shamanism all over the country.[35]

The spread of Shamanism was rooted in the idea of shamans as otherworldly creatures, bestowed with gifts that could improve the lives of common people. One of the key characteristics defining shamans was their heavenly origins; another was their "kingly" origins.[36] Although shamans

were often associated with the lower class, their link to divinity and kingship was forever tied to their reputations.[37] In all myths of shamans, however, despite their power, they were often mistreated or suffered great misfortunes.[38] Even with their divine ancestry, shamans were not above suffering. Rather, the famines, diseases, and misfortunes that plagued Korea's lower classes were shared by shamans and commoners alike. The ability to treat misfortune, and to improve it, however, were gifts that belonged entirely to shamans.

Shamans

The roles early shamans adopted demonstrated their ability to perform beyond traditional human limitations. The Korean word for "shaman," or "*Mudang*" comes from the Chinese term "*Mutang*," where "*Mu* etymologically means "the one who performs miracles" or "the performance of miracles'" and "*Tang"* means "an altar."[39] As shamans utilized music, dance, and entertainment[40] during *kut* to miraculously communicate with deities (mountain gods, heavenly gods, immortal maidens, and dragon gods[41]) and spirits, altars played a central role in the rites and rituals shamans took part in. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism, shamans were seen as respected figures who took on leading roles during their rituals and were revered for their singularity.[42] In pre-Confucian Korea, shamans experienced the benefits of high social and political statuses, as they often served as mediators between divine authority and Korea's imperial court.[43] As the majority of these spiritual and political authorities were primarily female, shamans enjoyed prominent roles in the Korean court.

Shamans could either be born into their destiny or inherit it. In Korean Shamanism, there are two main types of shamans: god-descended and hereditary shamans.[44] Historical accounts find that the majority of shamans in Korea were god-descended, as was customary in Siberia, where Shamanism is believed to have originated. God-descended shamans were differentiated from hereditary shamans by a key difference: the process that led them to become shamans.[45] While hereditary shamans developed a knowledge of their craft from family members—usually their mother-in-laws—god-descended shamans were born into ordinary upbringings and became shamans through what was known as a "shaman sickness."[46] As the "shaman sickness" involved powerful hallucinations, feverish dreams, and emerging signs of clairvoyance, shamans in pre-Confucian Korea attained elevated statuses because of their distinctions from ordinary people. The shamans, then, were seen as primarily powerful women who were able to contend with these supernatural forces.

While male shamans did exist, they were known as *paksa-mudang*, or "doctors."[47] The distinction between *mudang*, or "miracle workers," and *paksa-mudang*, or "doctors," implied that in the Shamanistic hierarchy, female shamans took on more powerful roles than their male counterparts—a reality that contradicted the developing beliefs of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.[48] In Shamanism, *paksa-mudang* could typically invoke deities and deceased spirits by performing intonations, whereas female shamans were more involved in decorative, entertaining, and musical displays during rituals. As Shamanism lent exorbitant power to its female practitioners, it would soon clash with the concepts of gender in Korea's subsequent religious traditions. The gender roles that separated Shamanism from Buddhism and Confucianism, in particular, meant that Shamanism never became the official state religion of the Silla, Koryo, or Joseon dynasties. The Shamanistic ideology that endowed women with authority became more and more inappropriate due to the norms of Korea's other, developing religions. Nevertheless, female shamans played pivotal roles in changing the lives of ordinary people.

Kut

To shamans, rituals, or *kut*, were one way to transform everyday suffering. Within the beliefs of Korean shamanism, its gods were often filled with resentment or harbored grudges which would then transcend to impact the human realm. [49] Shamans, however, had the power to perform *kut* and relieve the resentments and grudges of the gods by acting as mediators in communication with the higher realm.[50] To the common people, explanations that plagues and famines came from the discontent of the gods or deceased spirits meant that the unfortunate situations were fixable through *kut*. *Kut* were made up of three main parts: first, the shaman invited a god to attend the ritual, second, they entertained the god to appease them and make them willing to help the individual in need, and third, they sent the god back to the supernatural world.[51] Since shamans were the only beings with the ability to perform *kut*, the rituals themselves took on heightened significance in their rarity. Because shamans were chosen beings who led and performed *kut*, the rituals served as forms of entertainment endowed with spiritual powers.

Music played a central role in the entertaining quality of *kut*. Shamans always had to be highly skilled musicians, as the *kut* would be impossible to perform otherwise. [52] Shamans could play a variety of instruments and often had strong singing voices—with the ability to improvise while performing to suit the goals of whoever was in need of their ritual.[53] As shamans had to be adept dancers as well as musicians, the *kut* served two purposes: one, to entertain the crowd and the gods invoked in the ritual, and two, to solve the problem the *kut* set out to confront. Since Shamanistic rituals contained a large amount of singing and dancing, the musical instruments they employed—drums, bells, gourds, gongs, flutes, and brass instruments—all played critical roles in the experience. Like Buddhist and Taoist rituals, Shamanism involved the available instruments of its time and endowed them with supernatural qualities. The musical component of *kut* would play a pivotal role in the lasting power of shamans throughout Korean history.

In Shamanism, *kut* combined the power of shamans with ceremonial structures and intentions. *Kut* were often performed seasonally, to improve agricultural harvests.[54] *Kiwoojae*, a rainmaking ceremony, was often performed at specific times to suit people's needs.[55] *Kut* were also prevalent when a baby was born, when a man and woman were ready for marriage, and in time to pray for a happy life after the death of a family member.[56] As *kut* allowed shamans to performatively interact with deities and ancestral spirits, remnants of *kut*—such as their incantations and offerings found their way into Buddhist traditions. *Gyeong*, or Buddhist incantations, were often paired with a wooden gong struck by Buddhist monks.[57] The incantations were even sung in a tone that was similar to Confucian ritual chants[58]—which also had roots in Shamanism. Yet as Korean society became more Buddhist and less Shamanistic, the ordinary concerns of the common people still remained. Although many shamans were exiled from urban regions, characterized as heretical, "black magic" practitioners, the desire to turn to a religion like Shamanism, with its rituals that could simultaneously engage and pacify its audiences, was a source of stability in the politically uncertain, fourth-century Korea.

Shrines

Shamanism, like the religions that followed it, placed a strong emphasis on the importance of shrines. Shamans who experienced spiritual possessions, predicted future events, or led pilgrimages to sacred locations, all performed *kut* in specific shrines.[59] Like the Chinese origins of the word "*mutang*," shrines, or altars, were a crucial setting where *kut* could actually take place. Shamans would even sometimes set up temporary shrines in special, lucky

locations—often on a mountain or in a valley.[60] Petitioners and shamans would often lead pilgrimages to mountains in particular, as they played central roles in the Shamanistic tradition and its origin myths. Shamans often fasted for periods of time before arriving at sacred shrines, leaving offerings of food for the expecting deities and spirits. *Gukmudang*, a revered shrine located in Korea's mountainous region, would take on special significance in pre-Confucian Korea as a locale for *kut*, music, singing, dancing, and general celebration. To the lower class, shrines served as a place of refuge and the promise that their intangible desires had a material, recognizable locale.

Class and Shamanism

To lower-class Koreans, Shamanism was a means of settling misfortunes. As most individuals naturally seek to avoid misfortune, Shamanism served a practical function as a religion that offered peace and happiness in the material world, without offering concerns over salvation or redemption, or even life after death.[61] Since the Silla, Koryo, and Joseon dynasties all contained strict stratifications of wealth, class, and gender, Shamanism ideally appealed to living, rather than teleological, needs. One of Shamanism's central beliefs was that ancestors, nature, and even powerful kings had the ability to change the fortune of people through a process of appeasing spirits during shamanistic rituals.[62] The materialistic properties of Shamanism, then, allowed common Koreans to find solace in the strict, caste-like divisions of class with little room for mobility. Rather than altering Korean hierarchies, Shamanism promised to change and improve individual lives—a promise that led to its survival throughout the rise of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Early Buddhist Ties to Shamanism

In 372, Buddhism became the official religion of the early Korean Kingdoms and created heavy parallels between shamans and monks. Some of the variations of Buddhism even incorporated Shamanism within their beliefs. In Esoteric Buddhism, the order of "flower boys" existed, a group of young men who fasted in caves to achieve spiritual purification.[63] The "flower boys" were said to have originated out of a female group of warrior shamans.[64] Even Buddhist shrines developed strong similarities to Shamanistic shrines: as Buddhist shrines began offering flowers similar to those in shamanistic shrines,[65] the physical and material overlaps between shamans and monks even became spiritual. Occult Buddhism emerged, and by the end of the seventh century, Occult Buddhism replaced "traditional shamanistic rites."[66] As occult Buddhism was esoteric, ritualistic, and rooted in ceremonial practices, to the Korean people, it contained many of the same intrinsic, ritualistic properties as Shamanism. Although the number of shamans would decline throughout the Silla, Koryo, and Joseon dynasties, elements of the religion persisted.

The "Religion of Women"

The persistence of Shamanism is often linked to its status as a "religion of women." Not only did Korean Shamanism not discriminate against women, but it involved the worship of gods *and* goddesses, rather than focusing solely on "almighty" male gods. [67] As a result, Shamanism offered people fortunes such as wealth and health, while providing women with a place where they could meet their religious needs in ways other religions could not offer.[68] In pre-Confucian Korea, Shamanism provided women with powerful, even political roles that extended beyond traditional domestic and political hierarchies. Notably, Korean Shamanism was not a religion

that politically took control of individuals, but rather, it benefitted individuals by responding to their everyday needs and desires.[69] As Shamanism was a means of serving, rather than controlling people, it appealed to women whose needs were often underserved by political powers. Since Shamanism simultaneously promised women positions of power the ability to interact with power through shamans, its lasting impact continued throughout the Silla, Koryo, and Joseon dynasties.

The Unified Silla Dynasty

The Unified Silla dynasty, beginning in 668 B.C., introduced an influx of wealth, stability, and Buddhism to Korea. The Silla's alliance with Tang China led to a Unified Silla period, which began in 668 and lasted until 935.[70] Korea's early unification and its relationship with Tang China greatly influenced Korea's culture and government, as well as its religions.[71] One of Korea's main adoptions from Chinese culture was the growing role of the king and his central government,[72] granting kings the opportunity to obtain greater wealth and more powerful social positions. The resulting prosperity of Unified Silla led its religious life to flourish, as Korea was not distracted by warfare with other nations. As a consequence, Silla monks were able to travel to China to study Buddhism. The legendary monk, Wonhyo, who became the "father of Korean Buddhism," never actually completed his journey, but became integral to Korea's Buddhist movement.[73]

Wonhyo

The "father of Korean Buddhism," Wonhyo's travels became integral to his developing religious philosophy. In their account, Mark Peterson and Phillip Margulies find,

> Wonhyo tried to go to China once by land through the northern territory but was stopped at the border by Chinese guards, who said his description matched that of a criminal, a smuggler they were looking for. He tried again later to go by sea. He traveled across the Korean Peninsula from Kyongju on the east coast by land to the west coast to book passage on a ship in a port city. As the travelers neared the coast a storm blew in, and they had to take refuge in a cave in the hills overlooking the port. Thirsty and tired, they fumbled in the darkness and found broken pottery pieces that were large enough to catch rainwater dripping at the mouth of the cave. When they awoke the next morning, they found that they were in a crypt and that the "pottery" was a skull. Wonhyo took this as an omen that he should not make the journey to China. His decision to stay home proved providential for him. Whereas other monks would go and return to advocate the teachings of one school and one master, Wonhyo combined the teachings of several travelers and synthesized the various beliefs into a common belief system that became the core of Korean Buddhism. Wonhyo became known as the 'Father of Korean Buddhism.[74]

To Wonhyo, religion did not have to be a singular entity—rather, religious syncretism provided the basis for Korean Buddhism. Although Wonhyo was a Buddhist monk, he also turned out to be the father of another important religious movement: after conducting a relationship with a princess, Wonhyo fathered a son, Sol Chong, who was one of Korea's first, early Confucian scholars. [75] This led to Wonhyo's title not only as the "father of Korean Buddhism" but the "grandfather of Korean Confucianism."[76] The ties between Buddhism and Confucianism, although surprising, proved to be emblematic of the blending of religions that would define

Korea's later dynasties. And at the time, Wonhyo's Buddhism offered a customized version that appealed to Korea's scholarly elite.

As the bureaucratic wealth[77] of the Silla dynasty led to rigid and stratified social hierarchies,[78] Wonhyo's widely popular, Korean Buddhism—which consisted of five intellectual schools[79]—appealed largely to the aristocratic and educated upper class. According to Wonhyo, "the…karmically burdened mind" had the ability to distinguish "whether an experience [was] good or bad." [80] In his findings, he determined, "Outside the mind there are no dharmas, and there is no use in searching elsewhere."[81] Wonhyo's concept of Buddhism as a means of perceiving inner truths was widely appealing to a Korean class of scholars who were concerned with principles of elevation and enlightenment. The totality of Wonhyo's writings all expressed his version of Buddhism which, although they varied in diction, had fundamental connections to every other Buddhist school.[82] Although Korean Buddhism evolved into its own, practical version of Buddhism, its concepts returned to the principles of Buddhism which viewed the search for truth as a guiding principle. Unlike Shamanism, Buddhism offered its followers a means of actively seeking wisdom, rather than leaving it in the hands of shamans.

Buddhism in the Silla Dynasty

While Buddhism flourished amongst the ruling and elite classes, it also served as a means of justifying the Silla dynasty's rigid caste system. In the *Samguk yusa*, a historical account pieced together by the Korean Buddhist monk Il-yeon, Buddhist concepts of karma and rebirth were applied to justify Korea's rigid "bone-rank system": a caste system that linked one's rank in society to their spiritual descent.[83] While Buddhist karma made sense of one's hierarchical place in life, it also served as a tool that reified the Silla dynasty's political system and its need to enforce its stratification. Yet although Buddhism was able to meet the Silla dynasty's political needs through the support of its royal court, it was never "completely subordinated to that court."[84] Although a means of centralizing and maintaining power, Buddhism was not necessarily corrupted by the power dynamics that followed it. Like Shamanism, it was able to serve the needs of a select group of practitioners and offer them a sense of stability and spiritual satisfaction.

In the Silla dynasty, however, Buddhist doctrines had little to offer the common people. As Buddhism was focused on rejecting "worldly values and concerns," its concern with individual enlightenment and self-discipline remained more influential among the wealthy class, who actually "had material possessions to renounce."[85] To cement Buddhist doctrines throughout *all* class hierarchies, Buddhism borrowed from Shamanism, leading to the creation of *posai*, or female Buddhist officiants with strong similarities to shamans. The *posai* were a "sub-category of *mudang*"[86]: both performed variations of *kut*, shared "vegetarian offerings and flowers,"[87] and were interested in creating solidarity across religious Korea.[88]Although Buddhism drew from Shamanistic beliefs for its doctrines to have wider appeal, Shamanism was unlike Buddhism in that it was not a religion of scholars, accompanied by numerous religious texts. Shamanism, which had no written doctrine, could offer the uneducated, rural class a more accessible and inclusive belief system—one which would be challenged by Confucianism.

Early Confucianism

In the early Koryo dynasty, Korea became less stratified[89] with the early introduction of Confucianism. Confucian ideologies organized society into four classes consisting of an official class with rulers and scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, which cemented social divides

within the Silla dynasty.[90] On the other hand, pre-Confucian social classes were even more rigid than early Confucianism suggested; they did not allow any mobility within social classes.[91] Although early Confucian thought was appealing to the Korean king Wang Kon, who was pleased with its emphasis on state sovereignty and less social stratification, Buddhist monks pushed back, arguing that it was "too Chinese."[92] To the Korean kings, however, the ideological structure of religions like Confucianism cemented their authority. Nonetheless, Confucianism had limited influence in Korea until the thirteenth century—and even then, it appealed mostly to a smaller circle of the Korean elite.[93] By the end of the Koryo dynasty, Buddhism was the religion of the educated elite, early Confucianism appealed to kings, and Shamanism was still embedded in the lives of the common people. The rise of Taoism in the early 7th century was a mediating point, containing mystic philosophies and rituals akin to Shamanism.

Taoism in the Koryo Dynasty

In the early Koryo dynasty, Taoism was at the height of its popularity, thanks to its elaborate rituals and spiritual beliefs. In the twelfth century, King Yejong officially recognized Taoism.[94] Similar in many ways to Shamanism, Taoism provided physiological techniques for obtaining health and longevity"[95]; it preached that "by breathing in a certain way, men [could] slowly expel harmful *ki* from their bodies while accumulating good, life-prolonging *ki*."[96] With the growing literacy rates of the common people,[97] Taoist mysticism seemed to make sense, as it retained some elements of Shamanism. Like Shamanism, Taoist rituals centered around priests chanting, playing instruments, and dancing like shamans, often leaving offerings for deities.

The physiological powers in Taoist rituals were closely linked to its spiritual practices. In Taoism, the changing nature of physiology played a central role in its transition from China to Korea. Originally, the Chinese ideologies were part of a practice known as "internal alchemy" that would involve specific breathing practices and exercises that were formulated to maintain the overall circulation of "vital energy" in individuals' bodies.[98] To early Koryo Koreans, the partial appeal of Taoism was that it contained ritualistic elements that could be practiced by commoners, aristocrats, and priests alike. Yet after originally beginning as a philosophy, Taoism transformed in Korea when it moved in the direction of geomancy, thaumaturgy, and religion—aspects which all attracted the common people.[99] Rather than segregating power, Taoism provided a religious philosophy complete with ceremonies that entertained the public. The material, ritualistic expressions of Taoism had strong similarities to Shamanism, particularly as they appealed to multiple classes of Koreans.

Throughout the Koryo dynasty, religion was a means of cementing state authority. In the second half of the dynasty, Taoist morality texts revealed how human fates and fortunes could be determined by a rigid code of ethics and rules.[100] As a state religion, Taoism offered a system that supported power balances with its morality code, which Shamanism did not. From a political perspective, Taoism ritually served as a means of reinforcing the power of the Korean court. Popular Taoist texts, such as the *Yü-shu ching* and the *Ch'i-hsing ching*, focused on celestial deities, and in particular, how they played pivotal roles in deciding human fates and fortune.[101] The Taoist philosophies that connected humans to their life outcomes were also intimately connected with statesmanship. As Taoism became more and more popular, Taoists in political offices were given high-powered, official ranks.[102]

Growing as a state religion throughout the Koryo dynasty, Taoism expanded as a means of offering a philosophical answer to kings and commoners alike. Simultaneously answering prayers for rain, health, and longevity that the common people requested, Taoism had intersected

with the offerings of shamans. In Koryo Korea, neither Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism erected barriers among one another: the religions were all "intertwined."[103]Although Buddhism, Taoism, early Confucianism, and Shamanism all coexisted during the Koryo dynasty, the plurality and overlap of beliefs would give way at the end of the Koryo dynasty to the re-emergence of Confucianism—which by then had become a largely political tool.[104]

King Sejong

With the deposal of King Gongyang in 1394 and the rise of King Sejong, the era of Taoism and Buddhism ended. When King Sejong established the *Chiphyŏnjŏn* (Royal Academy) and developed *Hunmin Chŏng'ŭm* (a writing system made up of 11 vowels and 17 consonants), he was largely renowned for his cultural achievements.[105] Sejong's accomplishments are numerous and celebrated:

> He commissioned research and publications in medicine, pharmacology, and agronomy (agricultural land management), making the latest advances in each field widely available. He supported the advancement of calendrical science and timekeeping (for example, during his reign a highly accurate water clock was developed), he standardized weights and measures to assure and encourage fairness in trading, and he improved laws and lightened punishments.[106]

Aiming to modernize Korean society and simultaneously autonomize it, Sejong's achievements were rooted in transitioning Korea away from its Chinese influences. According to Sejong, the Joseon dynasty was supposed to be "more orthodox" and even "more true to Confucianism" than the Chinese were.[107] Sejong's interest in Confucianism marked the end of Taoism and Buddhism, particularly because Confucianism offered Sejong a centralized, political authority that could unite the Korean people. Unlike Taoism and Buddhism, Confucianism presented Sejong with a means of rationalizing and politicizing the Joseon dynasty's class structures.

In the process of "Confucianizing" the Korean state,[108] Sejong was also responsible for oppressing Buddhism As Confucianism promoted the authority of the state and king, its emphasis on harmony and order was particularly valuable to Sejong, who hoped to cement his political and educational reforms throughout Korea for centuries—which would require a strong government. Although Taoism and Buddhism reciprocally served the Korean government, Confucianism presented a scholarly, ordered approach to ruling that would usher out Shamanism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

The Joseon Dynasty and Confucianism

In the Joseon dynasty, Confucianism was an attempt to modernize[109] Korean society through its social order.[110] By this point, the Joseon dynasty had become a unique, "differentiated" state.[111] Its societal norms were deeply integrated into the ruling ideologies and power structures of its governance.[112] As Confucianism promoted the concept of collectivism,[113] it drew Koreans into larger societal spheres, instilling a sense of duty and piety to uphold one's societal role – for the "good" of the collective.

In Confucianism, collectivism focused on the harmony of the group, re-imagining Korea's traditional social relationships. Confucianism taught individuals "how to behave in everyday life, both in the family and in government."[114] By creating a strict set of standards for how individuals should view the importance of groups, Confucianism had little concern for

individual goals and desires. By representing a collective morality, Confucianism was primarily concerned with the present concerns of the state; it could not offer a religious education or doctrines on individualistic principles of redemption.[115] As a state-oriented philosophy, Confucianism had little to say about an individual's teleological concerns. The "good" of the collective, it seemed, was to place one's social order above one's individual fortune.

In Confucianism, the concepts of "benevolence" and filial piety" were just as important: Confucian kings insisted that filial piety was the "root of virtue, which all social rules should be constructed upon."[116] Unlike Shamanism, which connected individuals to deities and spirits, Confucianism was centralized around the concepts of filial piety, reciprocity, loyalty to one's true nature,[117] and ritual norms.[118] Confucianism was grounded in reality, without worrying about receiving power from or requesting favors from gods. Its teachings focused on internal changes within human beings, which contributed to its emphasis on group harmony. From King Sejong's point of view, Confucianism represented an ideal set of virtues that could transpose social norms and revitalize[119] the lives of the common people.

Although Confucianism advocated social harmony, it also imposed strict gender norms on Korean women. Throughout the Joseon dynasty, Korean families observed a "hierarchical relationship" between husbands and wives, which became the basis for the family unit.[120] This relationship was then replicated by a king and his subjects and a father and his son.[121] Consequently, Confucian wives were forced to sacrifice their agency and rights to serve their husbands and families, as established by Confucianism. Through the Confucian motto, "wise mother, good wife,"[122] emerged a version of femininity that was incompatible with shamans, who were granted powers that were now reserved for kings or other, powerful males.

Anti-Shamanism and Anti-Buddhism in the Joseon Dynasty

In the Joseon dynasty, shamans not only represented a subordinate female class but hinted at the dangers of disrupting its Confucian social order. To Confucian scholars, shamanism was considered "a vulgar thing" that they wanted to remove from social life as "quickly as possible."[123] As a result, shamans and Buddhist monks were both relegated to the lowest class, and were banned from entering the castle town and capital city.[124] As female shamans not only challenged gender power structures but symbolized a less scholarly, sophisticated perspective, their presence continued to clash with Confucianism. While Korea became more and more "Confucianized," shamans lost their pre-existing, reputable social status, and were instead abandoned to the "margins of Korean society."[125] Because the Joseon dynasty was now patriarchal, shamanism seemingly had little to offer.[126] To the Confucian Joseon dynasty, shamans represented an archaic age, resistant to modern ideologies. And to King Sejong, Shamanism defied the developing social norms that solidified his rule.

Confucianism had officially denounced Shamanism. Under the reign of King Sejong, the Office of Censor-General declared,

> A tendency toward worshipping spirits is not extinguished yet; rather it prevails throughout our society because common people are addicted to old customs. Trusting the frivolous and absurd words of *mudang* and *baksu* [male-shaman], they believe that human life and happiness are dependent upon those spirits. They do not hesitate to sing and dance, regardless of whether they are at home or in the fields… Other people, who are more deeply involved, sometimes bring even their wife and daughters to the *mudang*'s house to pray, of which they are not ashamed. These behaviors are caused by

their ignorance of how to worship spirits, and are destroying the righteous way of family-management"[127]

Female shamans were thus seen as "evil"[128] and corrupt, largely because the gender hierarchies in Shamanism disrupted the Confucian family hierarchies—which were then extended to the government and king. Rather than advocating religious plurality, for King Sejong to effectively reform Korea, Confucianism had to replace both Shamanism and Buddhism.

In the Joseon dynasty, anti-Buddhism isolated Buddhist monks and removed them from politics. Depoliticizing Buddhism was one means of cementing the political authority of the state; by the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, many Buddhist monks had even morally declined and spiritually relapsed,[129] enjoying their positions of power in court. Later, Korean Buddhist monks ended up relocating and withdrawing to the mountains to remove themselves from political and social activities.[130] Even when some monks were given permission again to "enter the capital city" in 1896, the majority of them remained hidden in the mountains.[131] The new isolation of Buddhist monks contrasted with their social activism in the Koryo dynasty, where monks had often received high political favors. Confucianism now aimed to remove the political power of Buddhist monks entirely. In the fourteenth century, "anti-Buddhist activism" was focused on ridding the royal court of all external, influences outside of Confucianism.[132] With "anti-Buddhism" came the desire to eradicate all religions from Korean life including Shamanism—which, like Buddhism, remained embedded in daily religious life.

The anti-Shamanism movement aimed, firstly, to disempower shamans. Shamanistic religious practices clashed with the Confucian idea of civilization.[133] The government's use of shamans in certain rituals (rain prayers, for example) gradually diminished, and other cults in which they had a presence were repressed, too.[134] As Shamanism was seen as a "superstition,"[135] it clashed with the philosophical teachings Confucianism extolled, which had little emphasis on rituals that aimed to improve individual lives. During the nineteenth century, no one who was in a position of power or authority, or had a decent education, was brave enough to speak in favor of shamans.[136] Those who spoke ill of shamans, on the other hand, were able to cement their own superiority; the "evil ways" of shamans were seen as self-evident.[137] As Shamanism was not a scholarly religion, its ceremonial *kut* and divinely-possessed shamans had no place in a Confucian society rooted in rationality and inquiry. Yet completely removing Shamanism from daily life proved difficult; although Confucianism provided a place for each individual, the desire for Shamanistic rituals and the potential for self-improvement remained central to the common people.

Shamanism and Rain-Making Ceremonies

To everyday Koreans, rain-making ceremonies were essential to combatting the seemingly supernatural power of climate change; they also kept shamanism alive. At the start of a drought, the Korean government set up policies that banned the number of drinks and side dishes a king could have, which became a nationwide law; this meant that the king and the rest of the country had to abide by laws that banned drinking wine, which came from brewing rice and meant that there was less food and water waste to be concerned with.[138] As the shamanistic rituals were largely spiritual, they often came after more practical routines to prevent droughts. Yet if a drought continued, rain-making ceremonies were performed: they took place at the Royal Ancestral Shrine and royal altar. [139] If rain still didn't fall, every province in the kingdom had to perform rain-making rituals in front of sacred mountains and rivers.[140] To commoners and

kings alike, rain-making ceremonies played powerful roles in determining the fate of Korea's kingdoms. And even when Shamanism lost its stronghold in the Joseon dynasty, rain-making ceremonies continued to be popular, highly-regarded rituals.

In rural Korea, rain-making ceremonies were rituals led by shamans to unite communities. Even in the traditional agricultural societies of the Joseon dynasty, shamans often took part in activities to induce rain by praying to the heavens to relieve massive droughts.[141] As a season of droughts versus no droughts was often a matter of life or death to agricultural Korea, shamans were integral to the longevity of these communities. When villages interacted with one another during rain-making ceremonies, they were able to "transform their social psychological situation[s]" and become one with their communities.[142] From a villager's perspective, the rain-making rituals were a means of finding and even celebrating one's place within a collective. Shamans, then, acted as the glue that kept Korea's agricultural communities together, both figuratively and literally.

To kings, rain-making rituals were essential to stabilizing the power of their regimes. Just like other premodern societies, early Korea was deeply affected by rains and droughts—climates that played a crucial role in supporting monarchical authority.[143] Kings themselves used a "menu" of rituals to create ideal climate conditions, legitimizing their political and spiritual power.[144] If a king proposed a rain-making ceremony, it was not only to end a dangerous period of drought but to ensure that their subjects would not rebel out of fury. While climate crises were major threats to the stability of early Korean societies, they also allowed rulers to show off their economic and juridical authority.[145] If a king ordered a shaman to perform a rain-making ritual and it resulted in rainfall, it reinforced his power as a successful ruler. In early Korean history, kings often utilized the spiritual power of shamans to magnify their own political power.

The Persistence of Shamanism

To the common people, Shamanism remained inextricably tied to a sense of autonomy and practicality. Rather than viewing the world scientifically, through its natural phenomena, Shamanism upheld the belief that supernatural powers were in control of the world.[146] As shamans had the power to control the supernatural realm, the ability to seek out the aid of a shaman lent some semblance of power to the common people by association. Practically, Shamanism offered individuals a sense of peace and happiness with the world they inhabited—even without offering life after death or redeeming their souls.[147] Despite the attempts to suppress Shamanism throughout the Joseon dynasty, the desire to interact with the supernatural realm remained. The continuity of Shamanism, then, was rooted in the interactions between commoners, their everyday concerns, and their hopes of inviting positive changes into their lives.

In all of its attempts to suppress Shamanism, Confucianism also kept parts of it intact. Even though Confucian officials tried to restrict and limit the practices of shamans, many of their wives often patronized shamans.[148] The Court itself, too, even patronized shamans on occasion.[149] While Confucian officials berated shamans, accusing them of stealing from the populace, and looking down on female shamans, those immoral women who performed in public, they did not directly attack underlying Shamanistic beliefs—that of the existence of spirits.[150] During the Joseon dynasty, women continued to support female shamans, while Confucian ideologies themselves were not completely separate from those of Shamanism. Both religions believed heavily in ancestor worship[151] and the spiritual system that it entailed. Moreover, the Confucian belief that human beings were connected to a variety of other beings due to the great, cosmic principles of the universe, was also part of Shamanistic beliefs, despite

the fact that the Shamanistic perspective of the universe was less systematically developed.[152] By the end of the Joseon dynasty, Confucianism and Shamanism were indelibly linked.

Although Shamanism remained a minority religion in the decades that followed, the process of religious syncretism and cultural diffusion[153] meant that the overlaps between Shamanism and Confucianism residually impact modern Korea today. As there are approximately 300,000 shamans left in contemporary South Korea, the question remains: without religious syncretism, would Shamanism still have survived?

Conclusion

According to historian Chongsuh Kim, "It is not correct to assume that 'Korean religion' has been formed with the introductions of various religious traditions like shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity…'Korean religion' is not a collection of individual religious traditions but an abstract, single idea, and all these different traditions have served merely as vessels which contain Korean religiosity or religious mind."[154] The continuity of Korean Shamanism is more than the advocation of individual desires and ritualistic beliefs; rather, it remains rooted in the nature of religion itself and the system of overlapping and borrowing that occurs within religion as a whole. Where the early origins of Shamanism, tracing all the way back to Siberia, speak to its ability to translocate, the mid-point of its history was connected to a larger process of Korea's following religions borrowing from Shamanism to keep their own doctrines alive. Rather than dissipating into thin air with the emergence of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, Shamanism was kept alive not only by the shamans and people who solicited them but also by the other religions that drew from its rituals and beliefs to remain relevant. Korea's early religious history, then, is defined not by what it lost in time but by what it retained because of what Korea's other, existing religions chose to keep.

In Korea, the lasting power of shamans speaks to the importance of a system of beliefs that responded to the concerns of individuals who were otherwise silenced by class, gender, and political hierarchies. The ability of shamans to perform *kut* that offered the promise of supernatural changes and improvements to their daily lives was also a measure of their strength. During the Unified Silla and Koryo dynasties, the rigid class hierarchies imposed a mindset on the common people that directed them to seek answers in the supernatural realm. If shamans understood the supernatural world, then maybe commoners, too, could find answers in their interactions. According to Kyong-geun Oh, "The shamanistic way of thinking did not disappear, it just deeply permeated to [the] minds [of Koreans] and still exerts influence on their lives."[155] Despite the changes that a society goes through—whether it be a shift in government, political ideology, societal structure, gender roles, or religion—the way the common people think is not easily or quickly alterable. Rather, the Shamanistic way of thinking was also a common way of thinking; it embodied the desire for change and the belief that change was possible. Instead of promising to erase suffering, Shamanism offered a way around it.

Throughout Korea's early religious history, Buddhism promised to end—rather than mitigate suffering. Yet its emphasis on relinquishing material possessions and seeking an absolute truth through self-abnegation had little sway with common people who had nothing material to lose—and who even hoped to increase their fortunes in the material world. To Korea's early scholars, Wonhyo's Buddhism introduced the power of the individual mind—and the spiritual state that encompassed it. In the Silla dynasty, Buddhism introduced an elevated way of thinking that "helped Silla to build up a higher standard of civilization."[156] Despite its scholarly and political achievements, Buddhism was never a "universal" religion; it was far too

deeply connected to the concerns of the elite whose lives it promised to improve. Yet as Buddhist monks drew from Shamanistic traditions, the religion arguably spread due to its connection with familiar Shamanistic rites and practices commoners were so deeply fond of. For Buddhism to spread, it had to adapt in order to compete with Shamanism. As a result, the Buddhism that the elite followed had deep, inescapable ties to traditional Shamanism, speaking to the ability of religions to change and adapt, as needed, to expand the scope of their influence.

Taoism, like Shamanism, was deeply connected to a way of thinking that focused on inviting external changes to human lives—through ritualistic and spiritual purifications. The physiological powers embedded in Taoist rituals, like Shamanism, were a means of dissecting human limitations and exerting some semblance of control over what could—and could not—be altered. If Taoism explored individual fates and fortunes, it was because by doing so, it could remain a democratic religion with widespread beliefs. As Donald Dean Owens discovered, "Taoism, with its mystic and naturalistic inclination, was more appealing to the early Koreans"[157] than early Confucianism. Its popularity, in many ways, was deeply connected to its similarities with Shamanism, commonalities that would continue to evoke positive public sentiments through popular activities, such as rainmaking ceremonies. Yet it was Shamanism, not Taoism, that remained the "religion of the common people." Perhaps the lasting power of Shamanism came from its ability to respond to the emotional needs of everyday Koreans—a task that Taoism, with its scholarly and statesmanship appeal, was somewhat less concerned with. Yet when Confucianism replaced Taoism at the end of the Koryo dynasty, the anti-Shamanist movement began in earnest—with less than fruitful results.

King Sejong's "Confucianization" of Korea introduced a complicated relationship to Shamanism that included a visible attempt to suppress it and a more invisible way of coexisting with it. As the Confucian concepts of collectivism and filial piety extended to recreate concepts of gender and femininity within Korea, Shamanism appeared outdated in comparison to the "modernization" of the Korean state. Despite Sejong's efforts to remove Shamanistic shrines and ban shamans from freely moving throughout the capital city, Shamanism remained deeply relevant to the lives of the Korean people. According to Oh, "It may be that the main reason for the continued existence of shamanism in Korean society is due to the sincere desires of the people, especially those who are suffering from poverty and anxiety. Throughout their long history in Korea, shamans have had a role as entertainers for the people in addition to their religious functions."[158] Unlike Confucianism, which offered few ceremonies, rituals, and dances, Shamanism played a central role as both a religious *and* cultural iconography throughout Korea's history. Looking back on the history of Shamanism, it is a story of persistence and adaptability, of religious borrowing and overlapping. The future of Shamanism, then, involves returning to its past, and observing what has remained and why.

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