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Death rituals for the living: Exploring the history and diversity of the shamanic death rituals in Korea[1]

Introduction: A characteristic of Korean shamanism – *musok*

Shamanism, known in Korea as *musok* (巫俗),[2] is one of the ancient belief systems of the Koreans. Its worldview, including the understanding of death and the shamanic death rituals that were formed based on this understanding, as well as Buddhist and Confucian worldviews and death rituals associated with those traditions, have shaped traditional Korean attitudes toward mortality and their perceptions of death and the afterworld throughout the ages.[3] These attitudes are still evident in contemporary Korean society, and shamanism continues to exert an influence on the Koreans' perception of death and the afterlife, while shamanic death rituals continue to be practiced.

Musok is a spiritual practice oriented towards the worldly realm, transmitted orally from generation to generation. It is a belief system built around the experience of the shaman and ritual practices. In the present era, the majority

[1] This article is largely based on chapters 2 and 5 of the author's unpublished doctoral dissertation (Rutana 2019).

[2] The Chinese character 巫, which is read as *mu* in Korean, is associated with the concept of a "shaman." The character 俗, which is read as *sok* in Korean, is related to the sphere of the *profanum*, or simply "the people."

[3] The introduction of Christianity in the 18th century, along with the emergence of new Korean religious movements in the late 19th and 20th centuries, have contributed to the diversification of the religious landscape of the Korean Peninsula. It is noteworthy, however, that in Korea, shamanism is not regarded as a religion, but rather as a cultural tradition (Baker 2008: 4).

of shamans in Korea are women,[4] who are typically designated as *mudang*. Depending on the region, they may also be referred to as *mansin* in the Seoul area, *tangol* in Chŏlla Province, or *simbang* in Cheju Island. Their male counterparts are typically referred to as *paksu* or *pŏpsa* (Yi 2015: 84–86). In Korean shamanism, there are no official organisations, sacred texts, or ritual manuals (Yi 2015: 81), which are essential to the so-called institutionalised religions, such as Buddhism or Christianity. Nevertheless, as with other systematized religions, *musok* has its own cosmology and philosophy of life and death, which are expressed, for example, through its mythology, narrative songs, called *muga*,[5] and rituals, known as *kut*. However, there is one further crucial element that shapes Korean shamanism – the role of the clients.

In their studies of Korean religions, numerous scholars have primarily concentrated on the role of the shaman, attributing to them a significantly more prominent position within the tradition than that of their clients. This is particularly evident in the context of the most important component of this tradition, *kut*. However, according to Ch'oe Chongsŏng (2022: 140–142), in the case of Korean *musok*, both the shaman (*mu*) and the people (*sok*), or clients and their roles, should be taken into consideration equally. In his book, Ch'oe writes that in terms of shamanic terminology, it would be helpful to understand the shaman as a "sacrifice" conducting the *kut*, and the people as "sacrificers" or clients commissioning the ritual. The client could be an individual, a family, or even a state. In terms of the implementation of the *kut*, the clients and their intentions are just as crucial as the shaman. "They have the active power to choose or exclude specific shamans in order to fulfil their religious intentions" (Ch'oe 2022: 142, my translation). Moreover, shamans are fully aware of this and therefore often improvise and personalise rituals in order to make them more persuasive, fulfil the wishes and meet the demands of their clients (Walraven 2002; Kendall 2009; Schlottmann 2019; Rutana 2021). Kim Dong-kyu (2012) referred to this process as a "negotiating practice."

In his study, Kim suggested that "shamanic rituals should be understood as negotiating practices between shamans, clients, and competing ideologies" (2012: 13), rather than fixed and unchangeable. Thus, it is valid to view Korean shamanic rituals not merely as practices that were formed at a certain point and persist unchanged over time, but rather as dynamic processes shaped by the interaction between the shaman, the client, and various concepts and symbols, often adopted from different religious traditions. In other words, Korean

[4] It is likely that the first Korean shamans were male, and that shamanism served the ancestors of Koreans long before the official introduction of Buddhism and Confucianism from China in the 4th century. With the introduction of the latter two, the ruling classes of the first Korean kingdoms moved towards more organised religions and started to officially support them, thereby marginalising shamanism. Furthermore, during the Chosŏn period (1392–1897), Neo-Confucian elites sought to marginalise shamanism, relegating it to the lowest class, and associating it with the common people, particularly women (Oh 2016: 78–81).

[5] *Muga* refers to songs performed by shamans during the ritual. For further reading on the subject of *muga* in English, please refer to Walraven (1994) and Im (2003).

shamanic ritual should be seen as a dynamic process that has its place in and is being shaped in the present.

This article builds on the aforementioned theories to demonstrate how Korean shamanic death rituals for sending the soul of the deceased to the afterlife have evolved over time, having been moulded by the influence of clients, and the diverse religious traditions and ideologies. The second section of this paper will therefore concentrate on the transmission and evolution of shamanic death rituals in Korea throughout history. It should be noted, however, that the study of the history of Korean shamanic rituals presents a significant challenge, largely due to the lack of written sources that would provide comprehensive descriptions of these rituals. Nevertheless, some of the available texts offer insight into the types of rituals performed during a specific historical period. Furthermore, some of these records offer insights into the worldview, the ritual process, and the names of the deities worshipped by the shamans at a given time. These records are analysed in the second section. Subsequently, sections three and four contain an examination of two selected types of rituals for sending the spirit of the deceased to the afterlife, namely *chinogi kut* and *ogu kut*, both of which continue to be performed currently. Furthermore, section four provides a comprehensive account of the distinctive ritual known as *sanogu kut*, which falls within the category of *ogu kut*. In contrast to *ogu kut*, *sanogu kut* is performed for the soul of an individual who is still alive. This analysis is primarily based on the ritual process of *sanogu kut* as documented by the Korean shamanism scholars Ch'oe Kilsŏng and Hong T'aehan.

Transmission of Korean Shamanic Death Rituals

In the context of Korean traditional beliefs and shamanism, "death is the worst pollution" (Kendall 1981: 118) that can pose a significant risk to the living. In this context, the term "pollution" is drawn from the Korean word *pujŏng*, which literally translates to "unclean." This term is used to describe the ritual impurity that follows death, an event that renders the entire household and its members "unclean." This impurity precludes the offering of sacrifices to the household gods who get offended by the contamination over the liminal period of mourning. The lack of sacrifice represents a threat to the relationship between humans and the gods, which in turn has a detrimental impact on domestic harmony, a domain in which these gods exert control (Kendall 1981: 117–120). Moreover, Koreans consider death to be especially "bad" or "unnatural" in cases where the deceased was killed as result of violence, died at sea or far from home, died at a young age, died as a bachelor, or died with many unresolved grudges in life. In such circumstances, the spirit of the deceased is more likely to remain in this world and cause hardships for the living (Pettid 2014: 144). Contact with any kind of malicious spirit, for example during the death rituals or the mourning period, can result in misfortune for the individual, including illnesses, accidents, or conflicts (Schlottmann 2020: 5). It is therefore of utmost importance to facilitate

the departure of malevolent spirits to the afterlife. This can be achieved through a shamanic ritual known as *kut*.

According to Korean scholars, *kut* can be classified in several ways. One such classification is based on the divine entity to which the ritual is offered. Such categories can be further split into rituals performed exclusively for the *mudang*, and those that are performed for the client. Another typology classifies shamanic rituals according to whether they are performed for the living, for the dead, or for the whole community, such as a household or village (Ha et al. 2002: 15). Finally, Korean shamanic rituals can be divided according to their purpose, into three different types: *chesu kut*, which is performed for the good fortune and well-being of the living; *kujŭn kut*, which includes healing rituals along with the rituals for sending the spirit of the dead to the next world (also known as *ch'ŏndo kut*); and *sin kut*, which includes initiation rituals and rituals performed for the tutelary deity of the *mudang* (Ha et al. 2002: 202).[6] The history of these rituals is extensive, yet studying it is a challenging task, as mentioned in the initial section. Nevertheless, the aim of this section is to present an overview of the history of death rituals in Korea.

The Chinese chronicles, *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi*), one of the oldest known written sources referring to the Korean ancient idea of the afterlife, contain the following sentence: "The dead are buried with the feathers of a large bird, which is meant to make them fly" (Chen 1975: 853, my translation).[7] This source describes the beliefs of the people of Pyŏnhan state (a confederacy of chiefdoms that existed in the southern part of the Korean peninsula up to the year 42), and makes clear reference to the shamanic idea of "the soul's journey."

The motif of the bird is a pervasive theme in many ancient cultures. In some traditions, birds are associated with the messengers of death, while in others they represent the soul itself (Kim 2010: 10). In Korean folklore, in particular, ducks are regarded as messengers that can enter the transcendent realm of the gods and communicate with them (Kim 2010: 14). Finally, in many cultures, birds are also considered to act as "carriers" of the soul to the afterlife. As evidenced by the aforementioned *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, ancient Koreans also perceived birds as creatures that could facilitate the entry of the soul of the deceased into the spiritual realm, and used bird feathers in mortuary rituals. However, Na Hŭira

[6] Rituals that belong to the third group of *sin kut* are performed exclusively by the so-called "charismatic" *mudang* (*kangsinmu*). Currently, scholars of Korean shamanism typically differentiate between types of shamans based on their initiation process. Charismatic *mudang* undergo a spiritual initiation experience, known as "spiritual illness" (*sinbyŏng*), during which a deity descends into them. This experience is subsequently followed by an initiation ritual (*naerim kut*) and extensive training. The second category of shamans is the "hereditary" *mudang* (*sesŭpmu*), who inherit their profession either through the bloodline or through marriage into a family of shamans. Unlike the first type, they do not undergo spiritual illness. Rather, the entire process of becoming a shaman is based on training (Yi 2015: 86–87). It should be noted, however, that these two types of shamans are not mutually exclusive. As Yi (2015: 87) has observed, recent studies indicate an increasing tendency for charismatic shamanism to be transmitted through bloodlines, in a manner similar to hereditary shamans, rather than simply manifesting at random.

[7] 以大鳥羽送死, 其意欲使死者飛揚.

(2003: 103) has also pointed out that the ancient concept of the soul's journey was not exclusively associated with birds. Instead, different objects, such as ships and horses, were also placed in graves to facilitate the journey of the deceased to the afterlife.

Another historical source that references the ancient shamanic death rituals is the *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk sagi*), written in the 12th century by Kim Pusik (1075–1151). This chronicle provides a comprehensive account of the history and customs of the Koreans from ancient times to the period of the Three Kingdoms (57 BCE–668 CE). It offers insights into the nature of shamanic rituals during this period, including shamanic practices focused on fortune-telling and healing, through which shamans also communicated with the spirits of the dead. In other words, the role of the shaman during the period of the Three Kingdoms was analogous to that of contemporary shamans (Yi 2011: 68), a point corroborated by one of the narratives pertaining to the life of King Yuri (19 BCE–18 CE).[8]

> Year nineteen [1 BCE], autumn, eighth month. A sacrificial pig escaped, and the King sent T'angni and Sabi after it. They caught the pig at Changok Marsh and hamstrung it [to bring it back]. Hearing of this, the King was furious and said, "How could you wound a victim destined for the worship of Heaven?" He flung the two men into a pit and put them to death.
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> Ninth month. The King fell sick. The shamans declared, "This is the baleful influence of T'angni and Sabi." So, the King sent someone to apologize to the two men. Then he recovered (Kim 2012b: 50–51).

This entry indicates that in the year 1 BCE, King Yuri fell ill. Upon inquiring of a shaman as to the cause of his illness, he was informed that the spirits of the two men whom he had ordered to be killed were responsible. In response, the king apologized to the spirits of the dead and was thus cured of his illness. As stated by Yi (2011: 71), the shaman from the story was most likely in charge of the ritual of appeasing the dead spirit, which at the time was a form of healing *kut*. Moreover, other historical accounts of shamanic rituals from that period that include the motif of vengeful spirits, such as the account recorded in the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk yusa*), which describes a shaman attempting to repel unfriendly ghosts believed to be the primary cause of illness in order to facilitate the healing of the client (Ilyon 2006: 297), confirm that during the period of Three Kingdoms, people held the belief that the souls of the deceased, which they considered to be grieved and vengeful, were the principal cause of misfortune, including illness. Consequently, they performed healing rituals to expel these souls. In other words, the available historical materials permit an assumption that during this period, one of the principal purposes of shamanic rituals associated with death was to appease the souls of the deceased who were causing harm to the living, and thereby cure

[8] King Yuri was the second king of the Koguryŏ kingdom, one of the Three Kingdoms. The other two were the kingdom of Silla (57 BCE–936 CE) and the kingdom of Paekche (18 BCE–660 CE).

the afflicted. Unfortunately, it is not possible to confirm whether the rituals for sending away the wandering grieved souls to the afterworld existed during that period, nor can it be confirmed that sending off the spirits was, for example, part of the healing ritual process at the time.

Historical sources, such as the *History of Koryŏ* (*Koryŏsa*), published in mid-15th century, indicate that during the Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392), shamans continued to perform rituals that focused on fortune-telling, healing, and communicating with the spirits of the dead. At the same time, however, new rituals emerged that focused on the blessings, and on repelling the misfortunes and calamities. These included the rainmaking ritual, known as *kiuje*, and rituals performed for the blessing of a family, village or even the dynasty, or the whole country, known as *kiŭn*, in which *mudang* also played an active role. Furthermore, historical records from that period also confirm the adoption by Korean shamans of deities, symbols and motifs derived from other religious traditions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, into their worldview and rituals (Yi 2011: 76).

The earliest historical source to confirm the aforementioned assertion is a poem titled *Lay of the old shaman* (*Nomup'yŏn*),[9] composed by Yi Kyubo (1168–1241). In his poem, Yi describes the *kut* form from the Koryŏ period, highlighting elements such as the possession of the *mudang* by the gods and spirits, shamanic dance and music, as well as changes in the voice and intonation of the *mudang* while conversing with her clients. Furthermore, he describes shamanistic shrines and mentions deities such as Chesŏk (Lord Śakra)[10] and Ch'ilsŏng (The Seven Stars of Northern Dipper),[11] which were adopted into the Korean shamanic pantheon from Buddhism and Taoism, respectively. As McBride notes (2007: 238), this description of the shaman's practices and of the shrine for communicating with her familiar spirits bears striking similarities to descriptions of shamans in the late Chosŏn period, and even in contemporary Korea. As was the case with previous periods, none of the available sources regarding the Koryŏ period mention the shamanic rituals for sending the soul of the dead to the otherworld. Partial descriptions of this kind of practice can be found in the historical sources from the Chosŏn period, which was the next Korean dynasty.

The rulers of the Chosŏn adopted Neo-Confucianism as a state ideology and officially condemned other religious traditions, such as Buddhism and shamanism, along with its practices. Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence that

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[9] For the English translation of the poem, see: (McBride II 2007: 241–243).

[10] In the Vedas, the deity known as Śakra or Indra is the ruler of the heavens and the guardian of the gods. This figure has been incorporated into Buddhism, where he is typically depicted as the guardian of the religion and the chief deity in the heaven of the thirty-three gods (Kinnard 2013: 374). With the advent of Buddhism in Korea, Korean shamans incorporated Chesŏk into their religious practices as a heavenly god. During the Chosŏn period, however, he became a particularly prominent household deity. Contemporary beliefs associate Chesŏk with the conception and birth of children, longevity, fortune, and agriculture (Cho).

[11] In the context of Korean shamanism, Ch'ilsŏng is regarded as a deity associated with auspicious fortune, wellbeing, and longevity, as well as the protection of children (Hyewon, Mason 2013a: 133).

the royal family often turned for help to the shamans, seeking good fortune or healing from illness, as well as in times of crisis, such as the death of a king.[12] This was the case with queen Inmok, dowager of King Hyojong (1649–1659), who ordered a *mudang* to perform a significant shamanic ritual for her deceased husband upon the king's death (Walraven 1991: 25).

The *Veritable records of the Chosŏn dynasty* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok*) refer to a significant Buddho-shamanic healing ritual, known as *yaje*, that was conducted during this period. It is of greater significance to note that at the time, the term *yaje* was not solely used to refer to the healing rituals, but also to the rituals performed by *mudang* at the time of one's death (Yi 2011: 105). The *Veritable Records of King Sejong* (*Sejong sillok*) and the *Veritable Records of King Sejo* (*Sejo sillok*) confirm this. Both sources reveal the purpose and form of *yaje*, which was practiced by the lower class of Chosŏn people. According to the records, this ritual was held in the event of illness or death. During the ritual, shamans, while singing and dancing, attempted to pacify the deities and malevolent spirits by offering them alcohol and ritual food. This kind of performance resembles not only previously mentioned shamanic rituals from the Koryŏ period, but also the *kut* performed today. It is noteworthy that Chosŏn's upper-status elites, who were typically hostile to any religious tradition other than Confucianism, also observed *yaje* upon the death of a family member (Pettid 2014: 141). However, of greater significance is the fact that some sources do confirm the practice of shamanic death rituals for sending off the soul of the deceased during the Chosŏn dynasty. Another such source is the poetry collection titled *Songs of green hills* (*Ch'ŏnggu yŏngŏn*).

One of the poems included in *Songs of green hills* references a shamanic ritual for sending the spirit of the dead, known as *chinogi kut* or *saenam kut*.[13] The poem depicts a ritual, here called *chŭnhogaesaenam*, in a satirical manner. The *kut* is performed at night by a toad that has decided to hold it for a soul of another frog that died on the same day due to abdominal pain. Other creatures, such as grasshoppers and crawfish, also participate in the ritual as musicians in charge of traditional Korean wind and percussion instruments (see: Kim 1977: 577). Although the poem does not provide a detailed account of the ritual process, it is nevertheless the first historical document to mention shamanic rituals of sending the deceased to the afterlife. Therefore, it seems plausible to suggest that these rituals were created as a result of the influence of other religious traditions and rituals, such as the Neo-Confucian sacrificial rites for the ancestors, known

[12] This serves to further confirm that, despite the fact that Neo-Confucianism was the state ideology at the time, traditional perceptions of life and death, above all the fear of death and what it might bring on the people, were deeply rooted in the Korean consciousness. Therefore, it can be assumed that in order to confront their fears and ensure their peace of mind, individuals attempted to utilize every potential means, in this case, a shamanic ritual.

[13] *Saenam kut* represents more elaborate and complex version of the *chinogi kut*. *Saenam kut* is divided into two main parts: a ritual held for the prosperity and wellbeing of the deceased person's family, in which the influence of Neo-Confucian rituals honouring the ancestors are evident, known as *andangsagyŏngmaji* and the part for sending off the dead, called *saenam kut* (Rutana 2021: 38).

as *chesa*, and the Buddhist view of the otherworld and rituals of sending the dead to the Pure Land (*Sukhāvatī*) of the Buddha Amitābha, which gained considerable popularity among Koreans during this period (see: Rutana 2021).

This section presented a brief overview of the historical development of Korean shamanic death rituals, based on the surviving historical records. These sources confirm that in ancient Korea, appeasing the spirits of the dead was a form of a healing ritual. Furthermore, as was the case with *yaje*, shamans were also consulted in the event of death. Finally, the existence of shamanic death rituals similar to those held today can be traced back to the Chosŏn Dynasty. As suggested by Yi Yongbŏm (2011: 118), it cannot be argued with certainty that there were no other similar shamanic death rituals for sending the dead to the otherworld before this period. However, no records have yet been found to support this statement. The following sections will focus on two contemporary Korean shamanic death rituals: the aforementioned *chinogi kut* and a death ritual performed for a living person, called *sanogu kut*.

Shamanic death rituals for sending the spirit of the dead

The historical sources referenced in the preceding section, originating from the Chosŏn era, represent the oldest source material in which the name *chinogi kut* appears. This ritual for sending the spirit of the dead to the afterlife is still observed today. During the *chinogi kut*, the soul of the deceased is granted an opportunity to resolve any unsettled issues with the assistance of a *mudang*, who is also responsible for ensuring the safe passage of the soul into the afterlife. Only when the spirit of the deceased has transitioned to the otherworld and transformed into an ancestral spirit can harmony between the living and the dead be restored.[14] Therefore, as Kim Hyŏnggŭn (2017) has already demonstrated, the ontological transformation of the deceased from a physical entity in this world to an otherworldly being, or to use a more traditional term, an ancestor, is of particular significance from the perspective of shamanism, and represents the primary focus of Korean shamanic death rituals. This is because, according to the popular belief that has shaped the worldview of Koreans over many centuries, the spirits of the ancestors may positively affect our lives in many ways. They can secure one's fortune and health, or the well-being of a whole clan or family. Moreover, even the well-being of the whole nation may depend on the veneration of ancestors and their goodwill (Nah 2011). In essence, although shamanic death rituals are primarily concerned with appeasing malevolent spirits and sending them to the afterlife, their ultimate objective is the well-being and prosperity of the people. Not only does the shamanic death ritual offer solace to mourners by alleviating their grief and sadness, but it also provides the deceased with a new role as an ancestor spirit. As Pettid (2014: 151) notes, this transformation

[14] For a detailed account of *chinogi kut* in English, see: (Pettid 2014; Schlottmann 2020).

allows the deceased to "become a positive force in determining the prosperity of the living."

In the present era, *chinogi kut* is observed in the north-east region of Korea, specifically in Seoul and Kyŏnggi Province. As previously stated, this ritual encompasses a multitude of forms and content, including *saenam kut* and *chinogi kut*. Furthermore, Hong (2004: 14) has demonstrated that in terms of scale, *saenam kut* can be classified into a number of different types. While wealthy families can afford the most elaborate and complex version of *saenam kut*, which is held for two days, shamans also offer simple ceremonies, known as *p'yŏngjinogi kut*, which focus solely on sending the dead to the afterlife. Finally, *chinogi kut* can be classified according to the length of time that has passed since the death of the individual. In this regard, Hong (2004: 13) has classified *chinogi kut* as follows:

- *charigŏji chinogi kut* – performed at the place of death of the deceased, within the period of five days;
- *chinjinogi kut* – ritual for a recently deceased, traditionally carried out within one hundred days after death (however, nowadays the term *chinjiongi kut* often refers to the ritual performed within the period of one year after death);[15]
- *mukŭn chinogi kut* – taking place after a significant amount of time has passed since the person's death.

Regardless of this typology, each of the aforementioned rituals for sending the dead follows a similar structure. In such cases, the practice of *chinogi kut* commences with a purification ritual (*pujŏng kut*), which serves the purpose of cleansing the ritual site. This is followed by rituals dedicated to the different types of shamanic guardian deities and gods, the purpose of which is to ensure the prosperity and well-being of the living. Subsequently, the rituals for cleansing the grudges of the deceased and sending the soul of the deceased are performed, followed by the final purification act in which ritual tools are burned, and the remaining spirits, who may still be dangerous to the living, are sent away. Nevertheless, as has already been pointed out in the first section, none of the shamanic rituals, even of the same type, is always the same.[16] In addition to the varying content of a given ritual segment, entire segments may also be omitted in accordance with the present needs of the client. Furthermore, *mudang* are capable of remodelling rituals by incorporating additional acts and symbols to enhance their persuasive efficacy. This can be observed in the following section, which demonstrates incorporation of motifs derived from other religious traditions. Moreover, charismatic shamans are able to personalise the ritual, for example, by performing oracles (*kongsu*),

[15] Schlottmann (2020: 2) proposes a time frame of 49 to 100 days, while Kim (2007: 45) indicates that this type of *chinogi kut* should be carried out between the 14th and 49th day after death. This evidently refers to the Buddhist belief of reincarnation and the 49-day death ritual.

[16] In his comprehensive ethnographic field study on *chinjinogi kut*, Schlottmann (2020) refers to five examples of the ritual performed by shamans of different traditions. Even though the general structure of the ritual remains consistent, variation in the segments performed by the shaman (even in cases where the same *mudang* performs the ritual) can be observed (Schlottmann 2020: 20–31). This provides compelling evidence of the dynamic nature of shamanic death rituals.

in which spirits of the ancestors of the client directly address him or her through the mouth of the *mudang* (Walraven 2002: 98). Finally, shamans are able to create new forms of a certain ritual when required. This appears to be the case with a death ritual performed for a person while they are still alive. The next and final section focuses on this specific type of *kut*.

Purification death ritual for the living

Ogu kut is a shamanistic ritual for sending the spirit of the dead. It is performed in the provinces of Kangwŏn and Kyŏngsang, in the eastern part of the Korean peninsula. As other rituals of this type, such as aforementioned *chinogi kut*, *ogu kut* focuses on dissolving the grudges of the deceased soul, as well as its transformation into an ancestral spirit. The *ogu kut* performed in the south-eastern regions of Korea begins with a purification ritual and is typically followed by an invitation ritual for the soul of the deceased. In such cases, separate rituals for the guardian deities and house gods are often omitted.[17] In north-eastern parts of Korea, however, the purification ritual is usually followed by rituals addressing the village guardian deities and ancestral spirits.[18] Similarly, in accordance with the traditions observed in the ritual of *chinogi kut*, a series of subsequent rituals are conducted with dedication to the deceased. These rituals are primarily concerned with cleansing of any residual resentment, and sending the deceased's soul into the afterlife. This is followed by the final purification rituals (Kim 2010). It is important to note, however, that *ogu kut* can also be performed for the living. This is particularly relevant for elderly individuals who wish to prepare for death and purify their souls of all resentments while still alive. In such instances, the ritual is referred as a *sanogu kut*.[19] Unfortunately, this kind of ritual is not a common practice, and therefore the amount of subject-related literature is also very limited. In this study I will follow the description of *sanogu kut* recorded in 1971 by Ch'oe Kilsŏng and analysed by Hong T'aehan (2016). The ritual included the following segments:

[17] For a comparative analysis of the *ogu kut* across different regions, see: (Kim 2010).

[18] Yi (2006: 184) suggests that, in addition to the ancestral rite which manifest as standalone ritual segment, the names of diverse types of guardian deities are typically invoked at the outset of the *ogu kut*. However, this is merely to notify them of the forthcoming ritual.

[19] The prefix *san* in the word *sanogu* can be translated as "living," which indicates that the subject of the ritual is a living person. However, *sanogu kut* is not the only Korean shamanic death ritual performed for the living. Similar rituals can be found in various parts of the peninsula, including a ritual called *sanssikkim kut* in the Chŏlla Province, and a ritual known as *sansiwangkarŭm* in the Hwanghae area, which is part of the ritual known as *mansudaet'ak kut*.

Sansinje (rite to the mountain spirit)[20]
Chosang kut (rite to the ancestral spirits)
Kolmaegi kut (rite to the village guardian deity)
Mun kut (rite of entering of the deceased's soul through the gate)
Ch'omangja kut (rite for the deceased)
Ogu Taewangp'uri (rite to Princess Pari)[21]
Yŏngsanmaji (rite of sending the spirit of the deceased to the other world)
Kkonnori, tŭngnori, t'aptŭngnori (celebration of sending of the soul of the deceased)
Chŏnjŏngbapki (*kamaet'agi*) (rite of sending the spirit of the deceased to the Pure Land)
Hwasan (burning the ritual tools)
Subuch'igi (rite for wandering spirits and minor demons)

This ritual adheres to the aforementioned conventional structure of *ogu kut* performed for souls of the deceased. However, certain elements have been modified. The ritual, as documented by Ch'oe, commences with three segments dedicated to the gods, village guardian deities, and ancestors. Whereas during the *sansinje* the participants of the ritual pray to the mountain spirit for good fortune, in the next segment they not only invoke the ancestors and pray for their rebirth in a better place, but also appease the household spirits. It is notable that in this instance, the act of cleansing the ritual site, *kuttang*, which is typically conducted at the beginning of the ceremony, was incorporated into the *chosang kut* (Hong 2016: 174). This phase of the ritual culminated in an act of appeasement of the village guardian deity.

The two following segments of the ritual focused on the soul of the deceased. After the soul has been summoned to the ritual site, the *mudang* offers it comfort and wishes a safe passage to the afterlife. In the case of *ogu kut*, during the *ch'omangja kut* the shaman acts as a mediator between the soul of the deceased and the living, resolving any outstanding issues and grudges, and providing solace to the living. Subsequently, the *mudang* commences the song of Princess Pari, a *muga* which narrates the tale of Princess Pari and her ascension to the role of a guide of the dead. This is followed by the most pivotal aspect of the *sanogu kut*.

Yŏngsanmaji is an act in which the *mudang* symbolically sends the soul of the living person, for whom the ritual is performed, to the otherworld. In this part

[20] Mountain spirits, known as *sansin* in Korean, are among the most prevalent deities in Korea. They are regarded as the protectors of villages, towns, or even of the entire nation. They are the guardians of health and longevity, and are able to provide favourable weather conditions and a plentiful harvest, as well as protection from misfortune. Additionally, it is postulated that Korea's mythical founder, Tan'gun, has become a mountain spirit. The veneration of *sansin* is not exclusive to Korean folk religion and shamanism; it is also observed in the Buddhist temples (Hyewon, Mason 2013b: 465–466).

[21] Princess Pari (*Pari kongju*, *Paridegi*) is a native Korean shamanic deity who is also considered the ancestress of all *mudangs*. She is the deity who presides over death, guides the departed souls to the netherworld and acts as their saviour. The section of the shamanic ritual dedicated to Princess Pari is often referred to as *Ogu p'uri* or *Ogu Taewangp'uri*. The term *Ogu* (*Ogu Taewang*) refers to the father of Pari, whom, according to the myth, she saved from death. For further references, see: (Seo, Lee 2000; Im 2003).

of the ritual, the shaman uses a long piece of cloth, which symbolises the bridge that connects the present and the otherworld, and ties its ends in two different spots – one inside the *kuttang* and the other outside the sacred space. Subsequently, the client's ancestral tablet is placed first on the shamanic ritual tool, the *panyayongsŏn*,[22] and then moved onto the fabric. It is then passed slowly towards the outer space, symbolising the future journey of the client's soul into the paradise (Hong 2016: 175–176). The significance of this symbolic journey is again reinforced in the act of *chŏnjŏngbapki* (*kamaet'agi*). In this section of the *kut*, the client is carried around the ritual space in a palanquin, while *mudang* and other participants invoke the name of Buddha Amitābha (Hong 2016: 175). This act is performed by the shaman with the intention of reassuring the client that following death, the journey to the afterlife will proceed in a positive manner and that their soul will reach paradise. Additionally, it is evident here that the Buddhist tradition has significantly influenced the development of shamanic death rituals. Once the soul has been sent to the afterlife, the final purification rituals are conducted. During these rituals, all the tools and utensils used in the ceremony are incinerated, and all remaining wandering spirits and demons are sent away.

As Davies asserts, death should be regarded as a significant challenge for the human consciousness (2002: 1). Nevertheless, this obstacle can be overcome through the practice of death rituals. The behavioural characteristics of death rituals, including chanting, music, gestures, location, mythology, and history, exert a profound influence on people's consciousness and assist them in overcoming negative perceptions of death. Consequently, numerous traditions and rituals have been established across cultures to prepare for and cope with problems surrounding death at many levels. Many cultures, including the Korean culture, have also developed practices that fall into the category of "death preparation rituals." *Sanogu kut* is a good example of this kind of practice.

The purpose of *sanogukut* is to reassure the living that, after death, their souls will hold no grudge against this world and others, and will be able to achieve a peaceful future existence. At the same time, as in the example of *sanogu kut* presented in this study, it is performed to reassure the person that they will be able to achieve happiness in the afterlife that they lacked in this life.[23] This transformed the traditional *ogu kut*, which typically evoked sorrow and despair, into a joyous celebration (Hong 2016: 176) offering clients a hope for a better future

[22] *The Panyayongsŏn,* or "wisdom dragon ship," is a shamanic ritual tool that has its origin in Buddhism. In the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, the symbolic ship carries karma-cluster spirits of Buddhist believers across the "sea of endless suffering" (*saṃsāra*) toward the Pure Land of Buddha Amitābha. This is a reference to the liberation from the cycle of *saṃsāra* (Hyeown, Mason 2013c: 46–47).

[23] The client of the presented ritual was a wealthy elderly woman who had lost two daughters in her youth and remained childless afterwards. Her husband also passed away. Consequently, she decided to spend her money and perform *sanogu kut* on a number of occasions. During these ceremonies, she expressed her desire not only for a rebirth in a better world, but also for the opportunity to meet her husband again and to live a happy life alongside him in the future world (Hong 2016: 176).

life. In this context, the *mudang* who had performed the ritual had successfully achieved the objective of the *kut*, as she fulfilled her client's wishes and released her from concerns regarding both this and future existence.

Conclusions

Death rituals serve a variety of purposes, including explaining what happens with the deceased after their death, describing the view of the afterlife as understood in a particular religious tradition, and comforting the grieving family and friends of the deceased. They also provide hope for a better future and the afterlife. Therefore, they are crucial from a psychological point of view. However, it is not easy to change the way humans perceive death, which is usually very negative. To address this prevailing negative perception of death, religious practitioners have introduced a multitude of visions of death and the afterlife. Moreover, these visions are not solely derived from a single cultural tradition; rather, they are a synthesis of diverse symbols and motifs of various origins. This is particularly evident within naturalistic religious traditions, such as shamanism.

In the shamanic worldview, death and all that is associated with it is regarded as the worst form of pollution and a source of chaos and misfortune. In particular, the spirits of people who died with some form of resentment and grief can become vengeful ghosts and bring harm to the living. In order to restore harmony to the world and protect the people from malevolent spirits, Korean shamans perform a variety of purification rituals for the souls of the deceased, and death preparation rituals for those still alive. This study has demonstrated that these rituals have a long and dynamic tradition, which has undergone constant change over time.

Throughout history, Korean shamans have attempted to adapt their worldview and rituals to the changing needs of their clients. This has resulted in the continuous evolution of shamanic ritual practices. During periods when Buddhism was a dominant force in Korean society, *mudang* incorporated deities associated with this tradition into their worldview. When Neo-Confucianism became the state ideology and ancestral rites in a Confucian manner were introduced, shamans adopted elements derived from those practices as well. During the late Chosŏn period, when Buddhist rituals of sending the dead to the Pure Land of Buddha Amitābha and motifs associated with it became popular among the masses, shamans introduced them as their own. Eventually, as the Korean population began to demand rituals that would prepare them for death, the shamans reshaped existing rituals to meet these demands. This dynamic process continues even today, shaped by negotiating practices between Korean shamans and their clients.

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SUMMARY

Death rituals for the living: Exploring the history and diversity of the shamanic death rituals in Korea

This article examines the diverse forms of shamanic death rituals observed in Korea from a historical perspective. Korean shamanism, or *musok*, is a highly dynamic form of faith centred on the figure of the shaman, associated rituals, and a worldview that has been passed down orally among shamans from generation to generation. It is important to note, however, that this worldview, and therefore the ritual itself, has never been fixed or unchangeable. To the contrary, Korean shamans have demonstrated the capacity for continual adaptation of their practices in response to the evolving needs of their society. This has been achieved by the adoption of elements from a variety of religious traditions, which has resulted in the continuous transformation, and even creation of new ritual forms. The death ritual performed when person is still alive, known as *sanogu kut*, is an example of this. This ongoing evolution has resulted in the rich diversity of shamanic death rituals observed in South Korea today.

Keywords: Korean shamanism, *musok*, death rituals, *kut*, *chinogi kut*, *sanogu kut*, purification rituals