

ANCESTRAL AFFLICTION IN KOREA

Modern Korean Society

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A Kut for a Recently Buried Woman

- During an evening funeral banquet in 1977 for a prominent woman I heard drumming in the inner room
 - Granny Shin (unrelated to deceased house) rushed out of the room brandishing a pine branch
 - Granny's branch touched over the husband and children of the deceased, and then the tiny 80-year old woman lifted the deceased's eight-year-old youngest boy into her arms and started frenziedly dancing until a friend told her to stop
- This was a shaman's *kut* (séance)
 - Granny was not the shaman (mudang) but she was channeling a spirit
 - When my dinner companion, the deceased woman's younger brother, made a disparaging remark about superstition, the deceased's oldest daughter turned to him angrily and said, "Don't you want mother her to go to a good place?" 어머니 좋은 데로 가려잖아?
- The ceremony ended when the shaman burned a skirt and vest that Granny had worn while channeling the spirit, and threw some food over the fire

What Had Happened?

- The deceased woman had suffered a “bad death”—in this case because she was obviously not reconciled to her death when she died
 - She had been taken to the village mountaintop shrine several nights previously to implore the mountain gods to save her
- As such hers was a dangerous soul that might not go quietly to the other world, the grave, and come back as a benevolent ancestor
 - Souls that hang around are dangerous and can cause illness (even death for children)
- This *kut*, therefore, was precautionary in case the ordinary Confucian funeral rites would not be sufficient to get the soul to go to its proper place

The Kut

- In kut like this the spirits often descend into pine branches
 - Söngju (House Lord) usually shows up first at a household kut
 - In this case Granny seemed to be channeling the soul of the deceased woman (who missed her family)
 - The clothes that she wore were probably for the deceased woman to assuage her longing and encourage her to go “to a good place”
 - These were what were burned at the end
 - The food thrown over the fire at the end was for *chapkwi*, wandering ghosts who always show up at rituals attracted by the food and noise
- It is likely that the shaman’s diagnosis of the problem was that the spirit of a previous wife of her husband (who had been superstitious and into shamanism) was what killed the woman

Roger Janelli and Dawnhee Yim 1982

- In *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society* they found 14 cases of ancestral affliction (pp 156-60)
 - Disturbed grave—four cases
 - Suicide not able to leave for the other world—two cases
 - Improper ancestor worship—one case
 - Bad death—three cases
 - Ancestors just want a kut—four cases
 - Laurel Kendall, “The spirits are restless and want to play.” (*Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits* 1985)
- Spiritual solution
 - Sponsor kut—five cases
 - Move grave—two cases
 - Ghost marriage—one case

Why Ancestral Affliction?

- Janelli and Yim argue that women are much more likely to see ancestors as hostile than men
- Freud—repressed hostility toward passed on kin is projected on their souls because of guilt of the living
- Fortes (Africanist)—latent rivalry between father and son
- Wolf—supernatural beings are directly modeled upon conscious perceptions of social relations
 - Cognitive theory unambiguously predicts that women ought to view ancestors more negatively than men

Spiritual Affliction

- All Asians are reluctant to admit ancestral affliction, and Janelli and Yim were two of the first to document it for Korea in English
- Why this reluctance?
 - Janelli and Yim
 - Do not see strong rivalry between father and son because succession happens before the father's death in most cases
 - Sons are emotionally dependent on their mothers but socially dependent on their fathers
 - Ancestors are benevolent when child rearing is indulgent and children are trained to be dependent
 - Ancestors are punitive when child rearing is harsh and children are taught to be independent
 - Difference between men and women
 - Women are coddled at home by mother, but then become more independent when they marry and move to their in-laws, so they are more likely to find their in-law's ancestors malevolent

Range of Afflicting Kin Greater than Ancestors

- “Chosang” can include non-agnatic relatives (unmarried brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles, in-laws, matrilineal kin)
 - Notice affliction in P’albongni (Sorensen 1977) was caused by a former wife of the husband, not an ancestor in the narrow sense
- It is part of women’s work to deal with household gods who protect the house from bad forces
 - Protecting family members from active spirits is part of a mother’s duty, but if they are troublesome they may have to call a specialist
- Active spirits (*kwisin*) usually have to be dealt with by ritual specialists called shamans
 - They tell fortunes, communicate with the gods, diagnose spiritual problems, and through the gods come up with solutions for these problems often through a séance

Lots of Sources of Misfortune

- Sangmun—funeral gates
- Sal, t'al—arrow of misfortune
- Son—direction spirit
- Kwisin (ghost)
- Moksins (wood sprites)
- Gods are not generally accused of bringing misfortune

Korean Shamans

- In anthropology shamans are religious specialists who communicate with supernatural entities (souls, gods, ghosts) through personal charisma
- Some definitions of shamanism emphasize “ecstasy” or “possession” as a diagnostic trait, but this doesn’t work well for Korea (cf. Mircea Eliade *Shamanism*)
- Korean shamans are of various types:
 - *Mudang* (female)—god descended or hereditary
 - God descended shamans (kangsin mu 降神巫) voice the gods directly, but it’s not really “possession” since they may voice supernatural and natural people at the same time one after another (e.g. 신들려 있다)
 - Some of these, known as *mansin* in Central Korea, hold highly dramatic *kut* with singing and dancing
 - In some parts of Korea chŏmjaengi, while god-descended, do “seated kut” quietly drumming and chanting
 - Other shamans may be termed *posal*, or *simbang* (Cheju Island)
 - Hereditary shamans (sesŭp mu 世襲巫) usually do not enter an altered state of consciousness, but communicate through mediums (say a susceptible villager holding a pine branch or a bamboo pole)

Process of becoming a shaman

- Shows signs of being chosen by a god
 - Weird dreams
 - Finds buried shaman paraphernalia
 - Interested in old music, dance, and clothes
 - May suffer from unexplained illnesses
 - May leave family and wander about “crazy” for a time
- Consensus that she is suffering from “shaman sickness” *mubyŏng* 巫病
 - People may visit her and ask for fortune telling or finding lost objects since she is now an “green shaman” *sŏn mudang*
- She and her family accept her fate and apprentice her to a “spirit mother” *sin ŏmi* to learn her trade
 - Cultural interpretation—a god is commanding her to be his (her) mouthpiece, and she could die if she refuses (some worship privately without going into business)

Séances (kut)

- *Kut* can be elaborate or simple, but are generally made up of a number of “acts” or *kōri*
- Minimal *kut*
 - Purification (pujōng kōri) and offerings to chapkwi outside
 - Benevolent Spirits called down, of which the House Lord (Sōngju) is usually the most prominent but also the ancestors
 - Offerings—usually fruit and ttōk and money
 - Chanting—sometimes quiet, sometimes dramatic with instrumental accompaniment, dancing and costume changes
 - Kongsu—the shaman channels the spirit that is causing (or can solve) the problem, and speaks in the spirits’ voices
 - Exorcism—sometimes but not always (slashing of knives)
 - Mugam—dancing in the gods’ costume when some participants may also channel spirits
 - Last sending (twitchōn)—the spirits are sent home

Reasons for Kut

- To invite good luck to a house or village
 - House—ant'aek, chaesu kut
 - Celebrate Village Gods—todang kut, pyölsin kut, madang palbi
- To avoid predicted bad fortune
 - Salp'uri, p'udakköri
- To treat bad luck or illness
 - Hongsu magi, uhwan kut
- To treat the souls of the dead
 - Chinogwi kut, ssikkim kut, siwang karüm, sangmun kut
 - These are done primarily in cases of a bad death (drowning, suicide, accident, soul bothering people) and can involve an enactment of the soul traveling to the "other world"

1976 Pyölsin kut



Religious Division of labor

- If the ancestors' souls are properly cared for, and the house gods happy the house is protected
 - But there are spiritual dangers lurking out there, and troubles can arise
- Normally women take care of house gods, village gods, and arrange kut if necessary
- Kut tend to be “of, by, and for women”
 - Men stand to the side and watch, but it would be unseemly to seem too interested (especially for high status men)
 - This doesn't necessarily mean they don't want it done—after all, their welfare may depend upon a successful kut—but its similar to not going into the kitchen
 - Women must care for the welfare of their families, and dealing with active spirits is part of that
- Men may not “believe in kwisin” but “it can't hurt, and it might help” so they may allow kut in their house