KOREAN FOLK RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

Modern Korean Society
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ANCESTOR WORSHIP

“Traditional” Korean funeral and ancestor worship customs are fundamentally Confucian, but mix with indigenous folk religious beliefs and Buddhism.

Korea today is religiously diverse.

1995 figures of Ministry of Culture and Tourism:

- Buddhist: 23%
- Protestant: 20%
- Catholic: 7%
- Other: 1%
- Non-religious: 49%
RELIGIOUS DIVISION OF LABOR

- Males take care of Ancestor Worship
  - Console the souls (yŏnghon) of ancestors
- Females take care of House Gods, Village Gods, and active spirits (kwisin)
  - Protect the family from misfortune, protect the village from misfortune, and deal with ghosts and other dangerous spirits
- Self-help religion
  - House head and his wife are priest and priestess in their own home, and take care of ancestor worship and house gods without the help of outsiders
- Religious specialists
  - These are brought in when things go awry and are beyond the control of ordinary household ritual
TYPES OF RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS

“pseudo-science” types:
- Chŏmjaengi—fortune teller
- Kwansangjaengni—face reader
- Sajujaengi—astrologer
- Kolsangjaengi—body reader
- Chigwan—geomancer
- Kyŏngjaengi (p’ansu)—sutra-reciter

Shamanistic types:
- Mudang (mansin)—female shaman
  - Sin naerin mudang—possessed shaman
  - Tangol mudang—hereditary shaman
  - Posal (bodhisattva)—Buddhistic female mudang
- Paksu—male shaman
- Shimbang—Cheju Island shaman
ANCESTOR WORSHIP COMPARED

- **Korea**
  - Eldest sons worship up to 5 generations of fathers and wives
  - Elites had permanent worship rooms, but most people set up temporary tables on the verandah for the occasion
  - Two types: household (kije), and tombside (sije)

- **China:**
  - Every house no matter how humble had a large, permanent altar in the place of honor in the main room of the house
    - On the left were josses (images of gods), and on the right the wooden ancestral tablets
  - Worshiped up to five generations of ancestors

- **Japan**
  - Ancestors worshiped collectively (rather than individually) once a year in Buddhist style with a butsudan (a lacquer “Buddha shrine”)
HOUSEHOLD ANCESTOR WORSHIP
기제(忌祭)

- Done within the house for near ancestors
  - house heads and their wives up to 5 generations removed from the current house head
- Done annually at midnight on the eve of the death anniversary of each ancestor
  - Seasonal services are held in the house for the ancestors as a whole on major holidays—especially lunar New Year (sŏl) and the Harvest Moon (ch’usŏk) on lunar 8:15
- Ceremony held at house of eldest son in the senior male line (chongga—k’ŭn chip)
- Eldest son in the senior line officiates
  - Descendants of the person being worshiped up to the great, great grandfather participate (8-10 ch’oj on “fourth and fifth cousins”)
TOMBSIDE ANCESTOR WORSHIP

Done for more distant lineage ancestors
  Patrikin and their wives 5 or more generations removed from the house head

Done annually in the 10th lunar month
  First day of month for apical ancestor
  Ancestors worshiped individually by generation, but more than one can be done on a day

Ceremony held in front of the tomb of each ancestor (usually in the mountains)

Head celebrant is the seniormost male in the eldest male line
  All male patrilineal descendants of the ancestor may participate, women often line up and bow behind the men

Tombside ancestor worship financed by revenue from special land (wit’o 位土)
  Traditionally the owners of the wit’o rented it out to tenants who would provide the food and carry it to the tombs
  For this reason, this sort of ancestor worship is primarily an elite activity (that is, a sign of yangban status)
ALL ANCESTOR WORSHIP CEREMONIES ARE FUNDAMENTALLY SIMILAR

- General term for ancestor worship is *chesa* (祭祀)
- Temporary altar is set up
  - Paper tablets chibang 紙榜 in back
  - a small table with food (“red east, white west”)
  - an incense burner in front
- In graveside rites, a “mountain spirit ceremony” *sansinje* is done to the side prior to the main ceremony, but in a house this is not necessary
ANCESTOR WORSHIP SEQUENCE

1. the gods descend 降神
   - Light incense to inform the spirits
2. first offering 初獻
   - Eldest son offers a cup of liquor/two kowtows
3. read prayer 讀祝
   - Formulaic prayer in Classical Chinese is chanted
4. second offering 亞獻
   - Eldest son or other male descendent offers liquor/two kowtows
5. last offering 終獻
   - Eldest son or some honored kinsman offers liquor/two kowtows
6. close the door 閘門
   - File out of room (or stand in silence) so ancestors can eat
7. open the door 開門
   - File back in (or stand in silence)
8. offer tea 獻茶
   - Attendants jiggle chopsticks in soup to signal finishing
9. remove the table 撤床
   - Altar is dismantled, and the paper tablets burned
PROCESS OF BECOMING A SHAMAN

- Shows signs of being chosen by a god
  - Weird dreams
  - Finds shaman paraphernalia
  - Interested in old music, dance, and clothes
  - May suffer from unexplained illnesses
  - May leave family and wander about “crazy”

- Consensus that she is suffering from “shaman sickness” *mubyŏng*
  - People may visit her and ask for fortune telling since she is an “unripe shaman” *sŏn mudang*

- She and her family accept her fate and apprentice her to a “spirit mother” *sin ŏmi*
SÉANCES (KUT)

- *Kut* can be elaborate or simple, but made up of a number of “acts” or *kŏri*
- **Minimal kut**
  - Purification (pujŏng kŏri) and offerings to chapkwi outside
  - Benevolent Spirits called down, of which the House Lord (Sŏngju) is usually the most prominent
  - Kongsu—the shaman channels the spirit that is causing (or can solve) the problem, and speaks in the spirits’ voice
  - Exorcism—sometimes but not always (slashing of knives)
  - Last sending (twitchŏn)—the gods are sent home
REASONS FOR KUT

- To invite good luck to a house or village
  - Todang kut, pyŏlsin kut, madang palpki
  - Ant’ aek, chaesu kut
- To avoid predicted bad fortune
  - Salp’ uri
- To treat bad luck or illness
  - Hongsu magi, uhwan kut
- To treat the souls of the dead
  - Chinogwi kut, ssikkim kut
  - This done only in cases of a bad dead (drowning, suicide, accident, soul bothering people)
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
  - This doesn’t necessarily mean they don’t want it done—after all, their welfare may depend upon a successful kut—but it’s 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”