

## **A Shamanic Korean Ritual for Transforming Death and Sickness into Rebirth and Integration**

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### **Abstract**

*Shamanism is still a popular form of spiritual practice despite the recent socioeconomic and technological development in Korea. This article discusses Korean shamanic tradition, major mythical characters, and a Korean shamanic ritual, Sitkimgut, from a psychological standpoint. Sitkim refers to the act of purifying and soothing the dead spirit, while gut means ritual. The psychological motifs of Sitkimgut are venting, cleansing, purifying, transforming the participants' negative emotions and trauma into more meaningful experience by going through symbolic death and rebirth. Mythological motifs of Sitkim are observed in many religions, myths, and fairytales in other world. Shamanic rituals, if carefully handled and applied, may help healing the wounded, resolving conflicts, and reconnecting with the numinous realm.*

**Keywords:** Korean shamanic rituals, *Sitkimgut*, rebirth and integration, psychoanalytical perspectives

### **1. Shamanism and Psychoanalysis**

Most Western scholars approach shamanism from rational perspectives as observers. So-called primitive culture is estranged since most modern people ignore or deny their influences on modern psyche. Jung, however, went through his own initiation and enjoyed his own shamanic way of living (Smith, 2007). Since Jung respected nature and solitude, and kept going on vision quests, he may be considered as having been a great shaman. With his early childhood experience with a medium and corpses, and with mystical experience during his midlife crisis, Jung understood that shamanic experience of being guided by spirits or talking with ghosts in rituals could be a way of healing and encountering the true self (Jung, 1973). Jung mentioned that modern fascination with spirits and synchronism is "a revival of shamanistic forms of religion practiced by our remote grandfathers (Jung, 1970)." Stevens and Stevens write, "Shamans use the power of the inner vision and imagination to journey for knowledge and for vital information. They learn how to suspend (hasty and crude) judgment and trust their inner guidance (Stevens & Stevens, 1988)." While modern technology applauds urgent decision and dichotomous thinking, shamanism may help learn how to brood over uncertainty and the unknown. Many anthropologists relate Shamanism with the religious ecstasy during rituals and practices of divination and healing. Smith writes that Jung's interpretation on shamanism was mainly based on Eliade's Shamanism, which emphasized archaic techniques of ecstasy. He doubts that Jung's experience with the medicine men in Africa and Taos Pueblo could be equated with encounter with true shamans (Smith, 2007).

### **2. Shamanic Tradition in Korea**

Since the Ko-Choson dynasty was established in circa 2333 B.C. (Iryōn, 2006), Korea has embraced many religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, and etc. The basic cultural foundations are connected to shamanism, however.

Samguk-sagi (The history of the Tree Kingdoms) by Kim Pu Sik (1075-1151) and the Samguk yousa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) by Monk Iryŏn(1206-1289) recorded various historical materials and literatures regarding shamanic rituals in ancient history. There also have been many books mentioning shamanic rituals, such as Dongkuk-isang-ku-jib (1241), Dongkuk-yoji-sungram (1481), Dong-guk Ses-gi (1849) and etc (Lee, 2002). Many Koreans have let shamans play the role of healers, advisors, fortunetellers and technicians, dealing with all spiritual beings, even though they do not necessarily believe in shamanism. In 1995, a field survey reports that 38 % of the total adult population in South Korea has hired a shaman (Kim, 2003). Unlike other countries where traditional medicine has been dismissed as mere superstition, the folk beliefs including shamanic fortune-telling and healing rituals still secretly persist alongside modern medicine and technology in South Korea (Magner, 1992). Despite rapid industrialization and rational shift against shamanism, shamanic tradition still persists within Korean culture. Many shamans are working in the countryside, the cities, and even on internet sites.

In remote countryside, trees that stand with colorful clothes hanging on its branches are still preserved as a part of shamanic rituals to meet the spirits or ghosts. Even former President Park Geun-hye was rumored to have made shamanic trees for her inauguration party. Significant number of psychiatric patients lost the chance of being cured by medicine and modern psychotherapy by fixating themselves to shamans (Rhi & Lee, 1988). In deeper layers of their minds, modern ego still is connected to the magical realm of shamanism (Bromberg, 1975). Nonetheless different from the primitive era when people believed in concrete power of ghosts, modern men may have the benefit of shamanic ritual as a symbolic vehicle toward the unconscious and spirituality. In this article, I describe a Korean shamanic ritual, called Sitkingut, which translates into “purifying and conciliating shamanic ritual for the sadness and regret of the dead spirit”, in relation to clinical circumstances seen from Jungian perspectives. The names of ‘Gut’ for the dead vary according to the type of situations and places in Korean provinces: Sitkingut (Cholla province), Jinowuigut (Kyunggi province), Kwuiyang puri and Wang Maji (Cheju island), Ogugut (Kyungbuk province), Mangmuga and Darigut (Hamhung and Pyungyang province) (Rhi, 2012).

### ***3. Basic Concepts of Sitkingut Ritual***

Sitkim means cleansing of something such as anger, regret, sadness, and desperation. Gut, shamanic ritual, intends to ameliorate the wounds made by tragic events, serious illnesses and sudden deaths of beloved people. Sitkingut for the dead is usually performed when somebody dies before he or she is ready to accept the dying process. Aim of Sitkingut is basically to sooth the sadness and frustration of survivors and the dead. Although the original function of healing seems to have been discolored and forgotten, contemporary participants and observers still can feel the healing nature of Sitkingut, when faced with their fears and sadness of death. Shaman (Mudang) first introduces the story of the deceased. Participants, mostly family members of the dead, then pray for the dead to go to the Kukrak (heaven) with the aid of purifying ritual and other participants to have a good luck (Rhi, 2012). Main formats of narratives and songs of Sitkingut, have been orally transmitted from the past. Shamans memorize the traditional creation myth chants with long rhymes. With the sounds of drum and pipes, Mudang chants, songs, and dances for hours and hours. The experience may be similar with a “Shamanic State of Consciousness (Harner, 1980).” While participating in gut for the dead and the lost, participants keep on praying, dancing together, eating, drinking, weeping, and sharing their pain and the stories of the deceased people. The gut eventually builds up energy for the participants to eventually encounter a healing moment. All of the movements are strongly charged with emotional vigor. Most Korean shamanic rituals are held by female shamans and participants are mostly women. Traditional Korean culture has been patriarchal and male-centered, but the shamanic rituals have been exceptionally female-centered. In most Korean shamanic creation myths, powerful and masculine gods like Indra, Zeus, Allah or Yahweh are not observed. Instead, male gods and female goddesses are rather harmoniously and mutually staged and interact. Shamanisms probably have played a role in balancing patriarchal masculinity of Korean peninsula with its feminine counterpart.

### ***4. Components of Sitkingut Ritual***

#### ***4.1. Major mythical characters***

Paridegi, one of important goddesses of Korean shamanic tradition, is believed to have been abandoned by her parents as the 7<sup>th</sup> off-spring of seven daughters. Infant Paridegi is then drifted toward the sea in a small box until she reaches the underworld. She then has to stay in the underworld for 7 years before she gets married to an

underworld monster, Mujangsung. After having 7 sons, she revisits this world in order to cure her sick parents. After Paridegi cures her parents, she makes her husband become the guard-god toward the underworld and her 7 sons becomes the Big Dipper and she the ancestor of all the Mudang, Korean shamans (Suh, 2003). Paridegi's father, O-gui-daewang (O-gui-King), who had been cured by Paridegi, suggests that she inherit half of his country. But she rejects it and becomes the first shaman goddess (Cho, 2006). Paridegi is usually called to protect and purify the deceased and the sufferers, very similar to how Bodhisattva and Divine Mary are believed to save the wounded and the sinful. Encountering Paridegi in the ritual is a form of repetition of the past (creation myth) for the present (recently deceased). Analyst in Korea may recall the motif of myths and fairytales for the clients as a reference.

#### 4.2. Preparation for Shamanic Ritual

Before starting gut, women prepare abundant amounts of food, including a boiled pig-head, rice cakes, many layers of vegetable pancakes, meats, chicken, fishes, and rice wine. Mudang wears five-color long traditional costumes and hats and carry fans or bells or flowers or knives. Sitkingut usually starts with making fake money (Chi-jon) for the underworld journey, gathering flowers for deceased's soul (Nuk-dangsuk and Ji-wha) and preparing long hem cloth for otherworld (Ko). Women who are closely related to the deceased eagerly pray in front of shrine table which is full of varieties of food for the ancestors, the house-spirit and the newly dead. Right to the main table of the shrine is a small food table also prepared for the recently dead. Below the main table, another food table is made for Jeosung saja (an angel of death or psycho-pomp toward the underworld).

Mudang, as a mediator between the dead and the alive, highlights sufferings of the dead with long chants. The first stage starts with gut for the ghosts of the street, bedroom, roof, house, and finally the earth. Then, the gut for shaman-Buddha, the deceased, and the suffering, and for purification is held. There are more stages including lowering the bar of the spirit, up-brining of the spirit, making the road to the underworld, resolving anger and sadness and etc (Lee, 1996).

#### 4.3. Five Stages of Sitkingut Ritual

1) For the goddess of the underworld, Paridegi-goddess has been believed to lead the recently deceased into the underworld. 2) After the calling of Paridegi, Mudang, as a medium, narrates how the deceased, the patients and the lost in the sea suffer from hardships. 3) Mudang dances holding Ko, a white knobby lengthy cotton and hemp-clothes, which symbolizes the bruised wounds in the heart of the dead. Ko signifies the lonely and toilsome road toward the underworld. 4) Mudang cuts off Ko to transform it into small pieces, which are later used as underworld currency. 5) Mudang dances with a sham, a miniature ship for the dead toward the underworld. With this dancing, Mudang and some participants usually go into a semi-trance by encountering the ghosts and the timeless space. Dancing with Ko aims to purify and heal the traumas and suffering. (Fig.1)

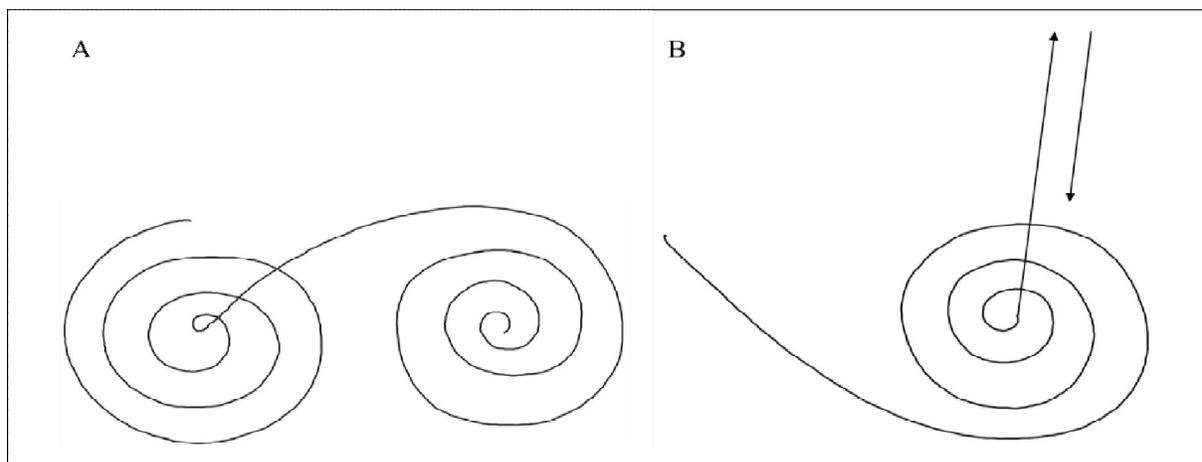
Figure 1. Dancing with Ko



#### 4.4. Elements of Sitkimgut ritual

Sitkimgut, depending on Mudang, deceased person, places, time and occasions, is often improvised. However, Mudang always sings with the same dance that circles only in one direction with monotonous drum beats and pipe sounds. Circular dancing is the most formalized part of the gut (Rhi, 2012). It starts from the center of the circle and returns into another circle, all the while continuously hopping vertically. (Fig.2) Shamans dance with fan, bell, and flowers to embody the image of the tree of life (axis mundi). Center may be an important symbol of enlightenment that derived from Buddhism. Many shamans call themselves bodhisattva. Buddhism teaches that all of the living beings are trapped in samsara, the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Mudang's dancing is a concrete way of presenting the nature of our circularity. Most circular dances such as Arabic Debke, Greek chorea, and Islamic Hadra dances, are similar to prayers and meditations, and are meant to facilitate unity of communities. Circular dancing may be close to signifying the Limbus minor, which Paracelsus mentioned (Jung, 1971).

**Figure 2. The direction of dancing in Sitkimgut. A. Turn left and turn right, B. Turn left and Domu (跳舞)**



The musical instruments employed in this ritual consist of a gong (drum), and jing (cymbals) and piri (conical oboe). Mudang usually wears a traditional military style costume and puts a white ban around her head with a flower-shaped knot on the left side.(Fig. 1). She sings, holding a fan in her left hand, a kerchief in her right and sometimes a cluster of small bells. Mudang dances and sings Mu-ga, the ritual songs of creation myth, and recites spells for the dead and various Buddhist scriptures such as Dharani of the Great Compassionate One. Shaman's bells and pipes are made of metal. Drum on the other hand is carved of wood. Fake ship is built to ease the sea journey to the underworld and the clothes for the dead are burnt to ashes by fire. All these small instruments and equipment in the ritual represent alchemical elements of the universe. Five Eastern alchemical elements (water, earth, metal, fire, and tree) are interfused. In the final phase, people in the gut ritual are to feel relieved from the guilt, sorrow, anger and etc. Stevens writes, "In the shamanic tradition, anything that helps someone is considered medicine for healing; this includes totems, plants, minerals, power places, ceremonies, events, and practically anything that can be named (Stevens, 2014)."

#### 4.5. Role of Mudang in Sitkimgut ritual

Mudang, as a mediator between life and death, the sick and the healed, upper-world and under-world, help people to be in contact with the dead, not just through trance state and medicine. As Pio Filippani-Ronconi mentioned, shaman's opus supports people in need to overcome their hardship and finally re-visiting particular cosmology and visionary images (Filippani-Ronconi, 1997). Mudang in Korea does not perform Sitkimgut in a trance, but in a rather formalized and well-structured state. Different from the Eliade's emphasis on trance state, contemporary anthropologists mention that shamanic state of consciousness is different from ordinary state of consciousness and unconscious. Harner also pointed out that western cultural conceptions with regard to "trance" often carry the implication that it is a non-conscious state (Harner, 1980). Such binary differentiation is a modern western view point.

Sitkimgut is an example of encountering both the living and the dead, similar to how Jung emphasized the transcendental function of a healer-shaman as the mediator between the mundane and divine, beyond bereavement.

### **5. Parallel Mythological Motif of Sitkim**

Motif of cleansing, purifying, venting and relieving one's negative emotion or experience is observed in many religions, myths and fairytales. For instance, Bodhisattva (Guanyin in Chinese, Kwansum in Korean), a female Buddha, usually carries a water vase in her left hand to symbolize purification (Leighton, 1998). Lotus, a flower that grows in muddy marsh, is also an icon of bodhisattva's purifying power as lotus blooms on the surface of swamps. When lotus blossoms, mud is transformed into a beautiful altar. Bodhisattva functions as a lotus in this corrupted and decayed world. In Sitkimgut, *ko*, the white clothes, symbolizes the underworld river and flowers symbolizes the act of purifying. Japan, also well known for its obsession with purification and perfection, has a similar purifying ritual. According to an early Chinese document, 'the Eastern Barbarians' in the Record of the Kingdom of Wei (221-265), Japanese held 10 days funeral ceremonies and all members of the family went into the water together to cleanse themselves in a bath of purification (Zaehner, 1998).

Sitkimgut, *white hem*, an imaginary route to the underworld river, is an icon of purification in Korean shamanism, as Christian Baptism is also an act of purification. In a Gnostic Scripture, *Zostrianos's*, a Gnostic teacher abandoned his material body and ascended where he was purified. Being guided by the holy spirits, Zostrianos wrote, "the power of residing within me presided over the darkness and (for) it possessed total light. There I was baptized: and I received the image of the glories that are in that place, becoming like one of them (Layton, 1987)." Jung recorded a myth of Navaho Indians of Arizona carrying the symbol of dying and transformation: the Sky Father and Earth Mother united and found a turquoise which turned into *Estsanatlehi*. She was rejuvenated, transformed herself and eventually gave birth to the twin gods who slew the primordial monsters and was called the mother of the gods. *Estsanatlehi* is immortal. Transforming from a withered old woman into a pure young girl, she is close to an image of *Dea Natura* (Jung, 1978). *Paridegi* of the Sitkimgut is a goddess who guided the deceased to the underworld and became an immortal ancestor of all shamans, since she herself went to the underworld and slew the monsters (or married the monster and transformed him into a devoted husband) and cured her sick parents by purifying holy water.

### **6. The Meaning of Shamanic Rituals in the Modern Society**

Many people believe that tribal societies seem to stress participation in the collective activities and to be very different from the modern individualized societies. However, the concept of ego in the modern societies is often closely attached to the collective ideals and pressure, which hinder true individuation process. If shamanic rites help the suffering people to contact with numinous entities and experience an in-depth journey, they may make spiritual *temenos* for healing and individuation process probably far better than modernized collective activities like watching TV, smartphone and internet. Modern people using technological devices seem to have become alienated from their own emotion. Meanwhile, shamanic rituals force people to show their affection and response to death more candidly: "Crying for the dead bursts out from the lamentation for the impossibilities of taking back the deceased. It is an affect to make up the loss and emptiness, but it can be a solution for the suffering (Rhi, 2012)." Emotion in the gut for the dead is spontaneous and vivacious since it is encompassed by of chants, music, dances, and autonomous confessions. Without contact with our own emotions we cannot confront the meaning of loss and death. If aesthetically structured and soulfully expressed, emotion will help people contact with the mystery of life and death even in deep frustration and sorrow. Rituals are perhaps necessary for encountering the inner power of healing especially in the most frustrating situations. Unfortunately, however, Korea has been drifting away from the memory of the past shamanic religious tradition. Rapid modernization and westernization cut off the tradition of shamanic rituals, which have been transformed into mere performance arts, waiting to be denied and forgotten. Jung described Eastern culture as being more balanced than one-sided Western culture. He warned that the Europeans should not depart from his own nature and imitate the East (Jung, 1978).

Authors doubt Jung's romantic perspectives on Eastern culture are still valid. Sitkimgut helps catharsis, alleviation, purification, and salvation for the dead and living spirits to be esthetically concretized and manifested. While participating in Sitkimgut, disintegrated minds are slowly being reintegrated by the power of narratives, music, and dance. Like other religious rituals, gut is a living container of destruction and creation for the survivor and the dead.

Smith wrote that shamanic procedures support the development of transformation of individuals within the society (Smith, 2007). Sitkimgut helps them feel less burdened, reconnect to inner power and overcome bereavement process. Gut eventually facilitates participants to go back to their daily routines. For them, spiritual healing does not exist far away from their lives, but within the embodying experience of physical death and spiritual rebirth through rituals. Encountering spirits, especially in deep distress, may help people contact their unconscious to overcome their suffering, not only in the primitive cultures but also in the modern era, if it is well contained in sophisticated ritual and psychologically healthy frame.

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