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**Liora Sarfati, *Contemporary Korean Shamanism: From Ritual to Digital*.
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Shamanism poses a conundrum for scholars of religion in Korea. It does not meet the usual criteria for a religion. It does not have a well-defined body of sacred writings or a well-articulated theology. Nor does it have the sort of clear moral code usually associated with organized religions. Those may be the reasons religious studies departments at universities in Korea usually confine themselves to teaching about Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Christianity, and Korea's organized home-grown religions. Courses on Korea's shamanic tradition are more likely to be found in anthropology or folklore departments.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to understand the religious culture of Korea without taking into account the role shamanism has played in the past and continues to play today. Liora Sarfati's study of contemporary Korean shamanism reminds us that shamanism remains a conspicuous feature of Korea's religious landscape in the twenty-first century. She also reminds us that we have to take shamanism seriously as a religion, and not dismiss it as nothing more than folk tradition. After all, as she shows us, shamanism is based on a belief in the existence and powers of supernatural beings. It also has rituals for interacting with those spirits. If that is not religious, what is?

Though Sarfati clearly deems shamanism to be a religion, for her the precise identity of Korean shamanism, which she usually refers to as *musok*, is less important than what actual Korean shamans do in modern Korea and how their practices are understood and portrayed. In particular, she is interested in how the image and practices of shamans have changed as Korea has embraced the latest technology and media, particularly television and the internet. Her focus is on *mansin*, those shamans who enter a trance-like state and claim to be possessed by spirits, rather than on the hereditary shamans who confine themselves to performing rituals believed to influence the behavior of spirits, since it is generally *mansin* who have taken advantage of, and adapted to, modern technology.

She begins her study of the place of shamans in contemporary Korea by examining how shaman rituals have been transformed into cultural performances. She focuses on a ritual performance, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, at the

Traditional Performing Arts Festival held at the World Cup Stadium Park in Seoul --- a very different setting from the rural villages in which such rituals were traditionally held. She points out, however, that traditional-style paintings of the gods and traditional musical instruments were used to give the performance a traditional look. And, of course, the shaman performing the ritual wore the same sorts of traditional costumes shamans wore in past centuries. As Sarfati explains, shamans on a stage, therefore, are no less real shamans than those shamans engaged in ritual interactions with various spirits at rural mountain shrines.

In the following chapter, she looks at how shaman rituals are portrayed in cinema, arguing that changes in portrayals of shamans and their rituals on the silver screen are a reflection of changes in how society in general has changed its attitude toward *musok* over recent decades. At first shamans were depicted as relics of the past, representing ignorance and superstition. That changed after the turn of the century. *Musok* has come to be presented in recent years as a beautiful feature of Korea's indigenous culture, though actual shamans are still often portrayed as practicing a somewhat less than respectable profession unless they are among the few fortunate enough to be designated a cultural treasure by the government. Nevertheless, recently there have even been documentaries about shamans which are popular enough to be shown to paying audiences in theaters. However, those documentaries tend to focus more on the lives of shamans than on their actual religious beliefs, blurring the argument Sarfati makes that shamanism is still a religious force in Korea today.

That same distancing of shamanism from religious beliefs can be seen when Sarfati takes us into museums to show us how *musok* is portrayed within their walls. Here the focus is on the material objects used in *musok* rituals rather than on those rituals themselves. The religious side of *musok* is downplayed in favor of displaying it as an example of traditional folkways. Moreover, *musok* is usually presented as a feature of Korea's rural past, often giving the mistaken impression that it has disappeared in the modern world. Objects wielded by shamans to actively interact with various spirits become, in museum display cases, mere objects of passive human curiosity. There are exceptions, however. The Cheju Folk Village often has a resident shaman who will, for a fee, divine the future for those who seek her counsel. Another exception is the new Museum of Shamanism in Seoul, which sometimes hosts rituals on its premises.

Like the Cheju Folk Village does, television also helps support the image of shamans as people who can play a constructive role in society with their religious practices. Television tends to show shamans helping their fellow Koreans cope with the stresses of modern life. Over the last decade or so, such depictions have improved how the general public thinks of shamans. Television is expanding the range of people who are able to see shamans as real people who contribute to society rather than as charlatans or mere entertainers. However, it may also have stirred up others, such as conservative

Christians, to oppose *musok* as an instrument of the devil. Nevertheless, shamans themselves appear mostly pleased with how televised presentations of their lives and occupation have enhanced their public image.

The final medium Sarfati examines to understand the place and image of *musok* in contemporary Korea is the internet. A major advantage of the internet is that it allows clients to consult with shamans in the privacy of their own home, so that neighbors or co-workers will not know that they patronize practitioners of *musok*, which maintains a residual negative image in some circles. The internet also makes it possible for highly educated shamans who are skilled in the use of modern technology to attract a much wider clientele. Moreover, on the internet, they – not TV or documentary directors, nor museum curators - are usually in charge of how they are presented to the public, ensuring that they are presented in a more positive light.

The overall theme of Sarfati's study is the tension between the different ways we can encounter shamanism, either via the actual religious practices of shamans or through the dry presentation of those practices as more cultural and even aesthetic than religious. Another theme running throughout this book is the improvement in the public image of shamans over the last couple of decades. She credits the internet as the main force behind this change. Though many in Korea still see them as relics of Korea's superstitious rural past, there are others, even among the young modern and more highly educated generation, who see shamans not just as symbols of Korea's distinctive culture but also as possible advisors to help them navigate the complications they encounter in modern urban life.

Even though Sarfati makes it clear that she views *musok* as a religion, we do not get much information from this book about what shamans in Korea actually believe, other than that they believe that their gods are real and can intervene in human affairs for better or for worse. Nor do we learn much about what their clients believe, though we are informed that some clients patronize shamans with a “just in case their rituals are effective” attitude rather than a full acceptance of the beliefs underlying *musok* practice. That may be because, in *musok*, beliefs are less important than practice. *Musok* is more about what shamans do than what shamans and their clients actually believe. It can still be considered a religion, but one that falls outside the Western paradigm of religion, which prioritizes scriptures, theology, and belief over practice. Sarfati's labeling *musok* a “vernacular religion” is, therefore, appropriate, even though there appears to be some uncertainty in Korean academia over whether shamanism is truly a religion or not.

Sarfati reinforces her emphasis on shamanism as primarily religious practice by inserting (on p. vii) links to five short videos of shamans in action. These videos make it easier for readers to visualize the various shamanic rituals Sarfati describes. This work is already a useful guide to the place of shamanism in Korea today. By making these videos available, Sarfati has made her book even more valuable. I recommend this book not only

to professors looking for material to assigned in undergraduate classes but also for anyone who wants to gain a broader understanding of contemporary Korean religious practice, or of the role of media in shaping how Koreans understand their traditional culture.