

VILLAGE RITES

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A Rich Communal Heritage



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In ancient times, village rites were held by villages throughout the country. They provided villagers with a sense of common destiny, a sense of oneness, and promoted friendship and a cooperative spirit. Today, village rites are only held in a few villages. This scene is from the ūnsan ryōlshinjje in Puyō, Ch'ungch'ōngnam-do, one of the most famous village festivals still held



Koreans venerate their gods, of which there are legions, in a variety of ways according to their personal needs and the unique divine powers of each god. Household gods, such as the birth god, land god, and kitchen god, are invoked individually or by families when needed, whereas village tutelary deities are invoked on a regular basis with all the residents of the village participating in the rites. On occasion, however, individuals make personal offerings to the village gods depending on their own needs.

Statistics compiled in 1993 reveal more than 500 rituals are practiced in Korea today. The vast majority of these are held in honor of communally revered deities, known by a variety of names depending on region. Of the 500-plus deities recorded, 114 are mountain deities, 109 village tutelary deities, 68

tutelary deities, 23 combined mountain and river deities, 23 ancestral deities, 11 tree deities, 11 land deities, and 164 other miscellaneous deities.

Communal rituals honor a variety of deities, but mountain deities clearly dominate. For example, there are the *sansbin* (mountain deity), *tangsansbin* (tutelary deity), *sanchönsbin* (mountain and river deity), *tanganbalmöni* (tutelary grandmother deity), *tangsantöjishbin* (tutelary deity for land), *sanchönjönsbin* (revered deity of mountains and rivers), *chusantöjishbin* (deity of major mountains and land), *jöngsansbin* (deity of revered mountains), *myöngsandaechönsbin* (deity of large mountains and rivers), *chusansbin* (deity of major mountains), *tosansbin* (deity of provincial mountains), *sangsansbin* (deity of great mountains), *paeksansbin* (deity of white moun-

tains), etc.

How and why did Koreans come to worship mountain spirits and village tutelary deities? If communal rites were held with the participation of the entire community, there must have been something that bound the villagers together. By looking at the rites and the reasons behind them, we can learn much about Korean beliefs and traditions.

Ancient records attest to the Korean penchant for worshipping the spirits of mountains and rivers. According to Tang Chinese sources, the people of Silla and Paekche held rites to the spirits of mountains and valleys. *Samguk yusa* (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*) recounts how a heavenly god descended to the top of Mt. Taebaeksan, and Tan-gun, the founder of the Korean nation, became a mountain spirit after his

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The ducks on the sotta, or spirit pole, symbolize fertility and prosperity and are indicative of an agrarian people's affinity for water.

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death. It also states that spirits of great mountains appeared and danced in the court of King Hōn-gang and again in the court of King Kyōngdōk.

Mountain worship was strong in the Koryō period as well. There were many great mountains at which local officials and residents held rituals to the mountain spirits. Female shamans—Tōkchōksan, Paegaksan, Songaksan and Mokmyōksan—to officiate at the rites.

Korea's foundation myths clearly indicate the Korean people have always revered the spirits living in mountains. Indeed, mountains were a source of food, such as fruits, wild vegetables, and game, as well as other daily necessities. However, hunting and gathering food in the mountains was dangerous. There were many wild animals and other

perils. Mountains were a place of danger, a place where people needed divine protection. Perhaps this was the origin of mountain deities and the rites honoring them.

With the gradual development of agriculture, man began to rely less and less on the mountains for his livelihood. His trips into the mountains became less frequent. As a result, he needed to move his protective deities closer to home. Hence, the shrines of the mountain deities were moved from the mountains to the villages. The invocations of the rites for the mountain deities indicate that villagers were chiefly interested in preventing disaster, enjoying a good harvest and being prosperous. Because of their limited ability to defend themselves, people looked to the mountain spirits to protect them. They designated the mountain to the north behind their village *Chinsan*, or guardian

mountain, and believed that the deity residing there would protect the village and all its residents.

Sōnang was a tutelary deity believed to dwell at the entrance of a village or on a nearby hillside. It protected the village from evil spirits, disasters, and epidemics. The shrine for the *Sōnang* was called *sōnangdang*. It was usually a large pile of stones, an old tree with a rope tied loosely around the trunk, or a combination of the two. When passing a *sōnangdang* it was customary for a person to add a stone to the pile or tie a straw rope on the tree.

Rites to the *Sōnang* were held on behalf of the entire village. Women performed the rites on the First Moon, whenever the village was experiencing difficulties, or had a special request. The rites often continued for several days, as in the case of Tano rites held in Kangnūng in Kangwon-do Province on the fifth day of the Fifth Moon. These rites were officiated by shamans and local officials. They involved "escorting" the male *Sōnang* of nearby Taegwallyōng Mountain to the shrine of the female *Sōnang* in Kangnūng. The Taegwallyōng *Sōnang* was believed to have great influence on the village, so it was invoked to pray for a good harvest on both land and sea and to request safe passage for people who had to traverse the rugged mountains to travel to Seoul.

In some villages, mountain spirits were considered village tutelaries and the rites honoring them were referred to as village rites. Shrines for them were similar to the shrines for other village gods.

The shrine for a village's tutelary deity was usually at the foot of a mountain behind the village or near the entrance to the village, although it was located within the village itself in some places. It was usually an old tree, a group of trees, a pile of rocks, a large rock, almost anything. There may have been a pair of spirit posts nearby, either *changsung* or *sotta*, or both.

Most village rites were held on a regular basis, at the beginning of a new year and on other significant occasions. In the past, rain rites were only held in times of drought. Koreans were an agrarian people, generally

farming rice, so drought meant crop failure and starvation. Because the whole country would suffer, even the king participated in rain rites. During the purification period prior to the rite, the king refrained from visiting his lady's chamber and ate frugal meals. Clean water was brought from rivers or wells to wash the altar area, the market was temporarily relocated, all unclean activities that might enrage the heavens were prohibited, the king, taking responsibility for his lack of virtue, promised to lead a frugal life, and the number of side dishes in meals was reduced to a bare minimum.

The rites were also held in honor of the Dragon King, the ruler of the waters. Shrines for the water deity were usually near a river or a stream or on top of a mountain. As part of the rite, a large fire was made on top of a mountain so that the flames would reach the sky.

In addition to the aforementioned rites, there were also rites to prevent disease. Specific gods were designated for each sickness.

Performance of Rites

Village rites are held in honor of deities commonly revered by all villagers. Naturally all the villagers participate in them. When a rite is to be held, a number of villagers are selected as officiators, eg the master of ceremonies, the chief cook, etc. They must be of impeccable reputation and respected by all the villagers, and they should not have attended a funeral during the past year. Their duties include preparing for the rite, such as preparing the food offerings, as well as the actual performance of the rite. For a certain period prior to the rite, they must purify their minds and bodies through prayers and cold baths. This period of purification applies to all villagers. There are certain rules and taboos that must be observed. For example, they should not look at a corpse, visit a family in mourning, kill an animal, or contaminate the well from which the water for the rite will be drawn, and they must be careful of what they say and do. A villager travelling in other areas who has seen a corpse or killed an animal is prohibited from entering

After the villagers are fed and have had plenty to drink, the singing begins to the accompaniment of a farmers' band. Mask dances also follow the ritual as part of the effort to comfort the deities.

the village until the rite is completed.

The containers used to hold food for the ritual have to be new, and all food freshly prepared. A great deal of food is needed for the rite. A cow is usually slaughtered for a large rite, a pig for a small one. The expenses are borne by the villagers according to their means, either in cash or in kind. Sometimes the village *nongak* (farmers' music and dance) troupe will go from house to house to collect funds. Either way, the expenses are shared.

The rite itself is usually held at night, beginning just after midnight. First, a bowl of wine is offered to the god, then all the officiants bow. Next, an invocation is read, and the paper on which the prayer is written is burned. Food and wine are then offered to other deities, such as the earth god. Next, the food table is removed from the altar and the officiants sit down together and partake of the food and wine that was offered to the gods. When they finish eating, they ring a bell to let the villagers know the rite, and with it the taboo period, is over.

The villagers gather at daybreak to celebrate with much feasting, singing and dancing. The celebrating is an expression of their gratitude to the deities that protect them, satisfaction at having rewarded the deities, and hopes for continued protection. The bigger the rites, the merrier and grander the celebrations. The holding of village rites has thus contributed to the development of the performing arts.

Underlying Beliefs

These traditional rites are the manifestation of a profound belief in a multiplicity of spirits. The ancients believed almost everything, animate and inanimate, had a spirit that influenced their lives. They thus worshiped the gods of mountains, valleys, rivers, wells, rocks, trees, the sun, the moon, the stars, thunderstorms, wind, rain, and land. They worshiped deified ancestors, kings, generals, sages, and great men, and dragons, tigers and other animals, and birds. Even insects had their place in the pantheon. An ancient source says the Koryŏ people "did not take medicine but supplicated the gods when ill." This indicates the Korean people's strong belief in the power of their gods.

Of course, the belief in such gods has greatly diminished due to modern education and science and the influx of Western civilization and culture. However, many remote villages still hold rites to various village gods, and villagers dare not remove or damage the soil, stones or trees around their village shrines.

The ultimate purpose behind the holding of a rite, be it an individual rite or a village rite, is to achieve *subokkangnyŏng*, literally "longevity, good fortune and well-being" which can only be realized by avoiding misfortune and inviting good fortune. Man wants to be happy. He wants to live a long time. But living a long time with disease is painful and hardly enjoyable. Therefore, he wants to be healthy. But if he is poor, he will not be happy living a long healthy life. So he wants to be wealthy.

Our ancestors believed that one's fortune was favorably or unfavorably controlled by good and bad spirits. Thus, they developed a faith in a variety of deities that could prevent and eliminate misfortune by protecting them from evil spirits. Of course, the best way to avoid misfortune was to prevent it from occurring. Hence, village rites were held annually, sacrifices were conducted seasonally, sacrifices were offered frequently, and the shrines of the tutelary deities were kept clean and neat.

Once calamity occurred, a rite was held to appease the gods. When a certain spirit was feared, the villagers prepared many



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food offerings and prayed and bowed. If the calamity was deemed the work of an evil spirit, an exorcism was performed by a shaman to persuade the spirit to leave the village or to actually drive it away. Villagers sometimes tried to frighten spirits away with swords, arrows or lances.

A life free of disaster is an absolute precondition for happiness. The village rituals were meant to achieve this most basic of human needs. The villagers' cooperation in the ritual process reveals just how important the rites were in their lives. They shared a common yearning for happiness, and for this reason, the tradition has survived through the centuries.

Once the solemn village ritual is over, a joyous festival follows. The ritual itself is conducted by a small group in the wee hours of the morning, but all the villagers joyfully participate in the eating and drinking of the food offerings in the days that

The village nongak (farmers' music and dance) troupe goes from house to house to tread on evil spirits and collect funds to help finance the village rite.

follow. The feast is accompanied by dancing and music.

When day breaks after the ritual, all the villagers gather in the village plaza or at the house of one of the ceremonial officials to eat. Everyone participates, even if he or she is too poor to have contributed to the ritual expenses. Packages of food and drink are also sent to elderly shut-ins by messengers. Thus the entire village participates in the feast.

After the villagers are fed and have had plenty to drink, the singing begins to the accompaniment of a farmers' band. Mask dances also follow the ritual as part of the effort to comfort the deities. In fact, many traditional mask dances were borne of local village rituals. The longer the village tradi-

tion, the bigger the rituals, and the more pronounced the folk art forms.

Historical records indicate that "eating, drinking, singing and dancing lasted for several days after the ritual, and the sound of music was heard day and night." Clearly the Korean folk art tradition is based on a faith in deities and the festivities linked to rituals.

Village rites are a community activity shared by everyone living in the area. These people share the same interests, the same goals. They till the same land, gather firewood from the same mountains, marry together, and exchange labor. Cooperation is absolutely necessary. If left alone, one cannot effectively deal with life's dangers. Cooperation is a means of survival.

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