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DEATH IN KOREA – FOLKLORE AND RITUALS RELATED TO UNDERSTANDING OF THE UNDERWORLD

ABSTRACT

The main objective of the article *Death in Korea – Folklore and Rituals related to understanding of the underworld* is to analyze the meaning of death in traditional Korean culture. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to discuss original Korean beliefs related to the afterlife. The article will therefore present and discuss Korean folk stories related to the underworld, its inhabitants and the ways to get into it. To further emphasize the importance of death in Korean culture, the article will examine the rituals that ensure the proper passage of the deceased into the afterlife.

Keywords: folklore, Korea, death, rituals, underworld

THE DEFINITION OF DEATH AND HOW MODERN KOREANS' APPROACH IT

There is no such thing as a simple definition of death. Encyclopedia Britannica explains the phenomenon as: *Death, the total cessation of life processes that eventually occurs in all living organisms. The state of human death has always been obscured by mystery and superstition, and its precise definition remains controversial, differing according to culture and legal systems.*¹

This description draws attention to three major aspects of death. The first is the biological aspect, not discussed in this article, aside from adapting only the definition of death as *total cessation of life processes that eventually occurs in all living organisms*². The second one, related to the legal interpretation of death, would also not be useful when considering the traditional place of death in South Korea. Issues such as inheritance or the transmission of the family name are also outside the author's sphere of interest. Indeed, the article will focus on the third aspect of death, related to its cultural meaning. The purpose of this article is to present Korean beliefs related to their understanding of the hereafter, more precisely, the underworld. In order to achieve this, the first part of the article presents the Korean people's understanding of death as shaped by tradition. Then, the author analyzes two mythical narrations corresponding to the understanding of the underworld as the place where the soul goes after death. In conjunction with these spaces, their rulers and legends are introduced to explain how Koreans perceive them. Rituals associated with the underworld and its rulers are used to show Korean people's ideas of what life in the underworld is like. The final part of the article presents legendary characters with the ability or those known to travel between the world of the living and the underworld. All this provides an understanding of how Korean people shaped their view of death concerning the underworld.

It seems that for Koreans, death is something inevitable that awaits every living being. And at the same time, death is something that Koreans try to avoid with all their might using folk beliefs, rituals, and telling stories about people who overpowered death. Korean researchers say that today their society is even more focused or obsessed with issues such as youth and ways to delay death.³ It should therefore come as no surprise that one of the most popular greetings in Korea is to wish for a long life and prosperity for example: *myeongbog manhi badala*⁴ which can be translated literally as *may you have a long and happy life* or its New Years Day version *mansu mugang hasibsio*⁵ which means *may you live long and prosper*⁶. In opposition to this may be the fact that

¹ "Death," *Britannica*, at <https://www.britannica.com/science/death>, 18 V 2024.

² Ibid.

³ Kim Myeong-Sook, "Hanguin ui jugeum e daehan insiggwa taedo e gwanhan cheolhagjeog gochal" (A Philosophical Study on Koreans' Perception and Attitude toward Death), *Confucian Studies*, vol. 22 (2010), p. 83.

⁴ Kor. 명복 [命福] 많이 받아라.

⁵ Kor. 만수무강하십시오.

⁶ "Jugeum" (Death), *Hanguk minjog munhwadae baeggwasajeon*, at <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0053575>, 18 V 2024.

death at a young age, in a foreign place, or with a feeling of grief in the heart is considered a curse.⁷

Kim Myeong-Sook of Hallym University points out that modern Koreans view death as something negative, with no hope of a better ‘afterlife’ or finding peace.⁸ She believes this perception of death is related to Korean shamanism and Confucianism. It’s easy to understand that theory in terms of Confucianism, which regards death as something beyond human comprehension.⁹ At the same time, the claim that Korean shamanism has influenced the negative perception of death due to its primitiveness does not seem to be entirely accurate.

The concept of an afterlife exists in local beliefs. This place is most commonly referred to as *naese*¹⁰, which can be translated as ‘life after death’.¹¹ Even if we know the term describing this place it is impossible to find sources in which it is defined clearly. There seem to be two places in the local tradition that we can refer to as ‘the afterlife’. The first is known as the Palace of the Dragon King¹² and the second is the so-called underworld *jeoseung*¹³, which seems to be equivalent to hell¹⁴ from Buddhist beliefs. Folk tales and traditional Korean beliefs provide information related to the Palace of the Dragon King and its connotation to the afterlife¹⁵. The Palace is located under the Eastern Sea (in other versions of the story, there are many palaces situated in different seas, lakes, and rivers) and is ruled by *Yong Wang*¹⁶ – Dragon King. This deity is strongly associated with Taoism and came to Korea from China.¹⁷ *Yong Wang* is often described as an old nobleman with silver hair and a beard resembling corals, wearing traditional Chinese robes. He has power over rain, wind, and of course water and every creature living in it.¹⁸ An invitation to his palace is considered a great honor, and only the noblest of the noble can receive it¹⁹. The palace is also a destination for people who have died because of drowning.²⁰

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kim Myeong-Sook, “Hangugin...,” p. 83.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 86-87.

¹⁰ Kor. 내세 (來世).

¹¹ Jeong Jongsu, “Sangjanglye, salmgwa jug-eum-ui bangjeongsig-eul naemyeonseo” (Funeral, the Equation of Life and Death), *Uliyeogsaneo*, at http://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/km/view.do?levelId=km_005_0020, 18 V 2024.

¹² Kor. 용왕궁.

¹³ Kor. 저승.

¹⁴ Kor. 지옥(地獄).

¹⁵ Oh Se-gil, “Yong-wang,” *Hangug minsog daebaeggwaseojeon*, <https://folkency.nfm.go.kr/topic/detail/2618?pageType=search&keyword=%EC%A9%EC%99%95>, 18 V 2024.

¹⁶ Kor. 용왕.

¹⁷ “Yongwan,” in Chung Myung-sub (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Beliefs*, pp. 190-191.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ One of the best examples of receiving this honor is found in the story *Great Monk Seosan* (서산대사) or *Carp Returns Favor* (잉어의 보은) (Chung Myung-sub (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Literature*, Seoul 2014, pp. 125-127, 254).

²⁰ Oh Se-gil, “Yong-wang...”

The second place associated with the afterlife, known as *jeoseung* or *jigo*, does not lend itself to such a simple definition as The Dragon Palace. This may be due to the belief that in shamanism, the worlds of the living and the dead function on a horizontal plane relative to each other. The said idea makes the line separating the two planes of existence extremely blurred, so much so that one Korean proverb goes: *behind the front door is the afterlife*.²¹ After merging with Buddhism, Shamanism took its beliefs related to the underworld. One of the most representative depictions of this place are the scrolls known as *Siwangdo*.²² They show the ten rulers of the Buddhist hell, who judge the sins of the dead and sentence them to an appropriate punishment. The representations of the hell they rule correspond to the punishments they carry out.

The first hell, *Dosanjiog*,²³ where people stay for the first seven days after death, belongs to *King Jingwang*.²⁴ He judges people suspected of murder or threats and punishes them by hammering nails into them.²⁵ *King Chogang*²⁶ rules *Hwatangjiog*,²⁷ the second hell where people stay until the 14th day after death. *King Chogang* ties sinners to a wooden plank to extract their organs, thus punishing dishonest matchmakers²⁸, sellers, and those who mutilate people and animals.²⁹ *Hanbingjiog*³⁰ is the hell where people who are guilty of excessive drinking and causing trouble in this state reside.³¹ They remain here until the 21st day after death, enduring the punishment of having their tongues pulled out. This hell belongs to *King Songje*.³² The fourth hell, *Geomsujiog*,³³ is ruled by *King Ogwan*,³⁴ who weighs the sins of the dead and thus pronounces the sentence. In his hell, the dead remain until the 28th day after death and are stabbed with a spear or boiled alive as a form of punishment. *King Yeomra*³⁵ is the ruler of the fifth hell and the king who most often appears in Korean folklore. He is known for showing

²¹ "Jugeum..."

²² *Siwangdo*, usually translated as the Scrolls of the Ten Kings of Hell, depicts the ten rulers of hell. This type of art appeared in ancient China and came to Korea during the United Silla period. Today, most examples of the scrolls are from the Joseon period. "Siwangdo," *Hangug minjog munhwadae baeggwasa jeon*, at <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0069571>, 18 V 2024. Kor. 시왕도.

²³ Kor. 도산지옥 (拔舌地獄).

²⁴ Kor. 진광대왕 (秦廣大王).

²⁵ "Siwangdo..."

²⁶ Kor. 초강대왕 (初江大王).

²⁷ Kor. 화탕지옥 (火湯地獄).

²⁸ "Siwangdo..."

²⁹ Kim Kyungdeok, Kim Youngduk, "Implementation of Digital Contents of the Ten Kings of Hell according to Keyword," *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association*, vol. 20, no. 4 (2020), p. 533.

³⁰ Kor. 한빙지옥 (寒氷地獄).

³¹ Kim Kyungdeok, Kim Youngduk, "Implementation...", p. 533.

³² Kor. 송제대왕 (宋帝大王).

³³ Kor. 검수지옥 (劍樹地獄).

³⁴ Kor. 오관대왕 (五官大王).

³⁵ Kor. 염라대왕 (閻羅大王).

sinner their evil deeds in a karmic mirror so that they can recognize them for themselves. His kingdom is known as *Balseoljiog*³⁶, and people who arrive there are guilty of committing indecent acts, defaming others, or lying. They remain there until the 35th day after death and are punished by being beaten in an iron mortar. The sixth hell is known as *Dogsajiojog*³⁷, the deceased stay there until the 42nd day after death.³⁸ It is ruled by *King Byeonseong*³⁹, who judges people who have defiled or committed betrayal of the faith.⁴⁰ He punishes sinners by throwing them into the forest of sharp knives.⁴¹ Then the deceased goes to *Geobaejiog*⁴² where they remain until the 49th day after death. If they are found to be guilty of unjustified killing and cruelty to animals, they will be punished by *King Taesan*.^{43,44} The torture inflicted on them involves cutting through their bodies with a saw.⁴⁵ *King Pyeongdeung*⁴⁶ is responsible for punishing people who are unfaithful and commit evil deeds.⁴⁷ He rules over *Cheolsangjiog*⁴⁸ in which people remain until the hundredth day after death. Their punishment is to be crushed by an iron rope.⁴⁹ The ninth hell belongs to *King Dosi*⁵⁰ and is called *Pungdojiog*^{51,52}. People guilty of arson, abortion, creating erotic images or texts, as well as suicide are punished here. They are subjected to the torture of being in an iceberg and spend time in this hell for up to a year after their death.⁵³ The last hell is called *Heugamjiog*⁵⁴ and belongs to *King Odojeonlyun*.^{55,56} It is he who makes the final decision to reincarnate a person or condemn them to eternal hell.⁵⁷

³⁶ Kor. 발설지옥 (拔舌地獄).

³⁷ Kor. 독사지옥 (毒蛇地獄).

³⁸ "Siwangdo..."

³⁹ Kor. 변성대왕 (變成大王).

⁴⁰ Kim Kyungdeok, Kim Youngduk, "Implementation...", p. 533.

⁴¹ "Siwangdo..."

⁴² Kor. 거해지옥 (鉅骸地獄).

⁴³ Kor. 태산대왕 (泰山大王).

⁴⁴ "Siwangdo..."

⁴⁵ Kim Kyungdeok, Kim Youngduk, "Implementation...", p. 533.

⁴⁶ Kor. 평등대왕 (平等大王).

⁴⁷ Kim Kyungdeok, Kim Youngduk, "Implementation...", p. 533.

⁴⁸ Kor. 철상지옥鐵 (床地獄).

⁴⁹ "Siwangdo..."

⁵⁰ Kor. 도시대왕 (都市大王).

⁵¹ Kor. 풍도지옥 (風途地獄).

⁵² "Siwangdo..."

⁵³ Kim Kyungdeok, Kim Youngduk, "Implementation...", pp. 533-534.

⁵⁴ Kor. 흑암지옥 (黑闇地獄).

⁵⁵ Kor. 오도전륜대왕 (五道轉輪大王).

⁵⁶ "Siwangdo..."

⁵⁷ Kim Kyungdeok, Kim Youngduk, "Implementation...", pp. 533-534.

This image of hell, although structured, is not fully exploited in folk tales. Interestingly, the king who appears in stories related to the afterlife is *King Yeomra*, the ruler of the fifth hell. He is usually depicted on *Siwangdo* as a middle-aged man dressed in red or black royal robes. His attribute is a mirror in which the sinner can view his evil deeds. However, to an outside observer, the mirror only shows an image of people beating an ox with wooden clubs. Additionally, in the folk tales, we are introduced to *King Yeomra* as the person responsible for appointing the first Grim Reaper to the office.

Korean folklore also includes the story of the establishment of the first ruler of the afterlife, or the deity of death himself. *Origin of Celestial King*⁵⁸ is the story of two brothers, *Daeyeolwang* and *Sobyeolwang*, who compete with each other to rule the Earth at the beginning of its history. The men take on various challenges, including which of them will be able to grow the more beautiful flower on a silver platter. It soon becomes clear that the younger of the two, *Sobyeolwang*, has an affinity for cheating and will do anything to rule the world of humans. *Daeyeolwang* comes to terms with the situation and takes charge of the afterlife. In some variants of the story, he returns to earth and weighs the creatures that inhabit it, judging which of them will remain in the world of the living and which will become ghosts and live in the underworld. The story seems strongly connected to the shamanistic beliefs of the Korean Peninsula. Unfortunately, the themes in it are not developed further in other legends.⁵⁹

THE AFTERLIFE IN LEGENDS

The most well-known Korean tale of the afterlife is *The Tale of Princess Bari*⁶⁰. It has many versions, but its core elements remain the same. According to the stories, *Bari* is born as the seventh daughter of a royal couple. The father, disappointed by the situation, puts the infant in a box and sends it to the river for nature to decide the girl's fate. She is found by an elderly couple who raise her as their own. When the girl reaches the age of fifteen, a messenger appears at their home and informs them of the royal couple's fatal illness. In order to prove her worth as a daughter, *Bari* sets off on a journey to the afterlife to find a cure for her biological parents' illness. Along the way, she meets various mythical characters who commission her to perform certain tasks in return for

⁵⁸ As one of the shamanic songs, it has many variants. The version that appears in the article originates from Jeju Island and is believed to be the most common. It is worth mentioning, that most shamanic songs were written down by Korean and Japanese folklorists during the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula. Na Kyung-soo, "Cheonjiwangbonpuri" (Origin of Celestial King), *Hangug minsog daebaeggwaseojeon*, at <https://folkency.nfm.go.kr/topic/detail/2889?pageType=search&keyword=%EC%B2%9C%EC%A7%80%EC%99%95%EB%B3%B8%ED%92%80%EC%9D%B4>, 18 V 2024.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ It is also one of the shamanic songs. It is considered the most popular and important because it tells the story of the first shaman. "Abandoned Princess Bari" (바리공주), in Chung Myung-sub (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Literature*, pp. 24-26.

which she receives items such as magic bells or flowers.⁶¹ In the afterlife, she meets a mysterious underworld entity known as *Mujangseung*⁶², who becomes her husband. After living together for several years, the couple returns to the human world, where *Bari* uses magical items to heal her parents.⁶³

The story deals directly with the afterlife and death. Despite its various variants, it is hard to find descriptions of the underworld itself. In most variants, we learn that one can enter the underworld through a river that can only be crossed by boat. At the very entrance is a castle where sinners suffer for their sins. There is also mention of a lake, which can only be crossed by a rainbow bridge. Moreover, versions influenced by the Buddhist faith, confirm the information that the afterlife consists of many hells and the castle at the entrance to one of them is built from iron.⁶⁴

Although the variants of *The Tale of Princess Bari* do not contain descriptions of the afterlife, they include some interesting information. First, the afterlife is a place where a living mortal can enter. Of course, such a person must perform numerous tasks to prove their worth, but the journey is possible. We also learn from the story that in the underworld there is a cure for all illnesses, which in some versions of the story also has the power to raise the dead. Among the medicines mentioned are both the water of immortality and magical flowers. These flowers still appear in shamanistic rituals as the *jihwa* (지화). Created from paper and appearing in a variety of forms, these flowers serve not only as an offering to the dead, but also as a resting place for their soul when it arrives at the call of the shaman.⁶⁵ An equally important aspect of the story are the bells that *Bari* receives during her journey to the afterlife. In the tale, their sound calms the spirits, and in some variants of the story, it crumbles the walls of a castle located in one of the hells. It is believed that these bells still function in Korean shamanism as a symbol of the shamanic power. The *bangul*⁶⁶ is now used in most rituals and is attributed with the power to summon spirits and drive them out. Its sound compels them to confess their name and submit to the will of the shamaness.

The theme of travel between the world of the living and the afterlife also appears in the *Song of Heoungaegi*⁶⁷. The story contained in this song tells of *Heoungaegi*, a loving mother with numerous children, who dies and ends up in the kingdom of *King Yeomra*. The distraught woman, fearing that her children will not survive without their mother, begs the ruler for mercy. Touched by her maternal love, he allows her to return from the

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 24-26.

⁶² Kor. 무장승.

⁶³ "Abandoned Princess Bari...", pp. 24-26.

⁶⁴ "Bali gongju" (Princess Bari), *Hangug minjog munhwadae baeggwasajeon*, at <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0020479>, 18 V 2024.

⁶⁵ "Jihwa," in Chung Myung-sub (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Beliefs*, pp. 218-220.

⁶⁶ "Bangul," in Chung Myung-sub (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Beliefs*, pp. 218-220. Kor. 방울.

⁶⁷ It is one of the shamanic songs of unknown origin. Like all of them, the *Song of Heoungaegi* is considered part of the native beliefs of the Koreans. "Song of Heoungaegi" (허웅애기본풀이), in Chung Myung-sub (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Literature*, pp. 78-80.

underworld to the world of humans each night. This situation continues for some time, but the fact that the children remain happy and well cared for arouses the suspicions of one of their neighbors. She questions the orphans about the situation at home and learns that *Heoungaegi* returns every night to look after her offspring. The neighbor persuades the children to tie their mother's feet and hide her from *King Yeomra*. When he becomes aware of the situation, he angrily takes *Heoungaegi's* soul to hell and forbids all travel between the afterlife and the world of the living.⁶⁸

The story seeks to explain under what circumstances the unequivocal division between the world of the living and the world of the dead came about. The ruler of hell, *Yeomra*, appears in the story as compassionate and understanding towards people who have not completed their earthly business. He allows them to return to earth to fulfil their duties. After *Heoungaegi* does not return at dawn, he feels cheated and eventually closes the gates of the afterlife.

As mentioned earlier, *King Yeomra* appointed the first of the Grim Reapers to the position. The story of this event is described in the *Origin of Underworld Messenger Chasa*.⁶⁹ We learn from it that *King Beomul's* sons have been foretold of imminent death, and the only thing that can save them from it is sending them to a Buddhist temple for education. So, the boys are sent away from home and spend three years in the care of monks. When they return, they spend the evening at the home of *Gwayangsaeng*, whose wife decides to murder the boys to steal the packages they carry with them. However, the boys' souls cannot be at peace and are reborn as flowers, beads, and eventually *Gwayangsaeng's* sons. They live happily with their new family until the day of the Confucian examinations; after passing them, they drop dead in the ancestral temple. Distraught, *Gwayangsaeng* demands an explanation of the mysterious case from the local authorities, who, not knowing what to do, send a young official *Gangnim* to capture *King Yeomra*. He succeeds with the help of the deities whose protection he has submitted to. *King Yeomra* returns with him to the surface and holds court over *Gwayangsaeng* and his wife. As a result, the boys' souls are sent back to their native home, and *Gwayangsaeng* and his evil wife are condemned for their sins. *King Yeomra* is so impressed by *Gangnim's* abilities that he appoints him as his messenger, who becomes responsible for delivering the so-called Red Note – the notice of a person's death.⁷⁰

Some versions of the story state that *King Yeomra* only takes *Gangnim's* soul, leaving his body among the living, and due to that, he may become a Grim Reaper. In other stories about *Gangnim*, we learn that he eventually gave his book, which contains information about the time of people's deaths, to a wise crow. The bird lost the book, which led to people now dying in the wrong order.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *Origin of Underworld Messenger Chasa* is a shamanic song from Jeju. It is considered to be the most complex story of death related to indigenous beliefs. "Origin of Underworld Messenger Chasa" (차사본풀이), in Chung Myung-sub (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Literature*, pp. 67-68.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Jang Hee-cheol, <chasabonpuli> yeongu (Research on *Chasabonpuli*), Master Thesis, Jeju National University Graduate School of Education, 2004, pp. 21-22.

The tale of *Gangnim* again portrays *King Yeomra* as a forgiving and merciful ruler, observing order, punishing the bad, and rewarding the good. In this novel, for the first time, he is depicted as a king-official who appreciates people blessed with extraordinary talents. He also takes care of the order of the world, setting a suitable time of death for each person and ordering his Reapers to follow the rules associated with it. The aforementioned life-and-death order is disrupted by *Gangnim*, which worsens his relationship with the King.

The Grim Reapers also appear in *The Tale of Dongbangsak*⁷². From it, we learn that *Dongbangsak* lived 3,000 years, although he was destined to live only 30. He tells his neighbor that he managed to change his destiny by bribing a Grim Reaper. He gave him food, money, shoes, and a place to sleep, and in return, he changed the years of his life from 30 to 3,000. Unfortunately, *King Yeomra* decided to deal with *Dongbangsak* and sent another Reaper after him. For a long time, the old man was able to outwit the King's successive messengers, but he eventually got captured. There are two themes worth noting in the story. The first is the appearance of several Reapers; however, we do not know where they came from or how they were appointed to their positions. The second is the fact that they are extremely easily bribed and freely bend the rules set by *Yeomra*.⁷³

DEATH IN RITUALS

The ritual connecting the Dragon King to death is *Yongwang maji*⁷⁴. The ritual begins with the preparations of numerous offerings to the Dragon King and the recitation of shamanistic songs about the origins of the world. Then the shaman prepares the way for the arrival of the Dragon King. He spreads a white cloth from the beach towards the land, and along the material, he puts six green bamboo shoots. The shaman undertakes a song in which the lyrics explain that the Dragon King is trying to enter the land but has met many difficulties. The first of these is the numerous seaweeds that block his path. When the King cuts them down, they form a wall he has to move. To illustrate this, the shaman imitates gestures of cutting with a match and sweeping away the seaweed. Then, the stones under the Dragon King's feet are too rough, so he has to crush them. As a symbol of this event, the shaman rolls the stones over the material. It then turns out that the ground under the King's feet needs to be leveled, at which point the King notices small holes in the material that prevent him from crossing over. Eventually, the shaman gives him a bell, which symbolizes the ones put on the necks of the

⁷² *The Tale of Dongbangsak* (삼천갑자동방삭) is one of the Korean folk tales containing the popular motif of outwitting death, also known in many other cultures.

⁷³ Son Ji-bong, "Samcheongab jadong bangsag" (The Story of Dongbangsak), *Hanguk minsog daebaeg-gwaseojeon*, at <https://folkency.nfm.go.kr/topic/detail/5849?pageType=search&keyword=%EC%82%BC%EC%B2%9C%EA%B0%91%EC%9E%90%EB%8F%99%EB%B0%A9%EC%82%AD,18> V 2024.

⁷⁴ Kor. 용왕맞이.

horses, and the Dragon King decides to ride onto the land on horseback. The appearance of the ruler of the underwater kingdom among the worshippers offers the opportunity to symbolically bury the souls of people who have died at sea. For this purpose, a straw puppet dressed in the deceased's clothes is created and taken to the beach and the shaman asks the soul summoned to it where and when it died. Then, the puppet is covered with a shroud, and the shaman assesses, by using a bowl of water and an astronomical instrument, where the real body of the deceased is. Finally, the puppet is buried as if it were a real person. At the end of the ritual, the shaman thanks the Dragon King for coming, bids him farewell, and assures those gathered that the soul of the deceased has obtained peace.⁷⁵

*Siwangmaji*⁷⁶ is dedicated to the ten Infernal Kings. The ritual is intended both to honor the rulers of Hell and to bring peace to the soul of the deceased. It is also sometimes used to heal seriously ill people, due to a belief that says that since the Kings of Hell determine the length of life, they can also listen to prayers and influence the condition of the sick person. In the case of a deceased person, prayers are for the erasure of sins and the faster completion of penance. In the center of the ritual is a two-story table, with a statue of the King of Hell on its higher level and a statue of the Grim Reaper on the lower level. In the beginning, the shaman drives out all evil spirits that could interfere with the ceremony. This is followed by a prayer for long life, healing of the sick, and sending the souls of the dead to paradise. The next step is to pray to the Grim Reaper for the safe and trouble-free guidance of the deceased to the afterlife. Afterward, the offering of sacrifices to the Kings of Hell and the Reaper is made, followed by the description of their arrival in the world of the living, which is identical to that accompanying the arrival of the Dragon King. The ceremony ends with sending these beings back to their world and asking them to treat the deceased well. It is believed that this ritual allows for a final meeting between the soul of the deceased and their relatives and is meant to ensure that both parties come to terms with their fate.⁷⁷

*Jinogi gut*⁷⁸ is one of Korea's most elaborate funeral rituals. Its purpose is to relieve the family of the deceased of their grief and to make them feel cleansed of their sorrow and suffering.⁷⁹ Sometimes, the ritual is performed immediately after the death of a family member, usually, however, it is held on the first anniversary of the death.

The main part of the ritual focuses on the figure of the Grim Reaper, who takes the soul of the deceased into the afterlife. *King Yeomra's* messenger enters the house of the deceased pretending to be one of the tutelary deities, and only after a while does he reveal

⁷⁵ "Yongwang maji" (Welcome to the Dragon King), *Hangug minjog munhwadae baeggwasa jeon*, at <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0039622>, 24 V 2024.

⁷⁶ Kor. 시왕맞이.

⁷⁷ "Siwang maji gut," *Hangug minjog munhwadae baeggwasa jeon*, at <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0032417>, 18 V 2024.

⁷⁸ Kor. 진오기굿.

⁷⁹ M.J. Pettid, "Shamanic Rites for the Dead in Chosŏn Korea," in C. Horlyck, M.J. Pettid (eds), *Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in Korea: From Ancient to Contemporary Times*, Honolulu 2014, pp. 147-149.

his true name and begin to gossip with the house's tutelary deity, lamenting the poor reception. The Reaper also complains about the gifts being too sparse, and in order to encourage the family of the deceased to give him more money, he throws himself towards the altar while threatening that the deceased's journey into the afterlife will be unpleasant. When he gets bribed in the right way, he assures them that he will take care of the deceased to the best of his ability. Although such behavior on the part of a shaman disguised as a Grim Reaper may seem shocking, it intends to distract the mourners from their grief and purge them of their suffering. In this way, the spirit of the deceased will understand that his time in the world of the living is over, for his loved ones have mourned him and are still in good health. He can then go peacefully into the afterlife and experience peace.⁸⁰

DEATH AS A PATHWAY

The face of the Korean afterlife was significantly influenced by the mixing of local beliefs with Buddhism and Confucianism. This process led to the apparent disappearance of shamanistic beliefs, which adapted to the new philosophies. Of course, there are other places associated with the afterlife in Korean beliefs besides those discussed in the article. From Buddhism comes the vision of the Pure Land of the Buddhist paradise to which the worthiest of people are sent.⁸¹ The vision of reincarnation, which was mentioned when discussing the role of the ten rulers of hell, was also influenced by the Buddhist faith. In addition to the belief in reincarnation, ancestor worship also occurs in Korea. The rituals associated with it are known as *jesa*⁸², and the purpose of which is to remember and commemorate the dead. Although worshipping the spirits of the dead has been known on the Peninsula for a long time, the final form of the ritual also took its final shape during the Joseon period.⁸³ The main part of the ritual is based on making offerings of various foods and money to the deceased and remembering ancestors by praying at a home altar or visiting a cemetery. Nowadays, they are usually held on the anniversary of the ancestors' death, but traditionally, rituals took place during various important occasions relating to local holidays and family events. Although the *jesa* rituals are not directly related to the underworld, they clearly show Koreans' relationship with the afterlife. By honoring ancestors and including them in family ceremonies, Koreans show their belief in how a thin line runs between the world of the living and the dead.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Heo Yong-ho, "Seoul jinogigut sajaesamseong" (Jinogigut Sajaesamseong from Seoul), *Uliyeogsaneo*, at http://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/km/view.do?levelId=km_038_0060_0020_0020_0030, 18 V 2024

⁸¹ D. Baker, "Introduction...", pp. 4-5.

⁸² "Jesa" (Ancestral rites), *Hangug minjog munhwadae baeggwasaajeon*, at <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0051293>, 24 VIII 2024. Kor. 제사.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

It seems that for a long time, death was not considered permanent in the Korean tradition. The lack of specific descriptions of the afterlife in Korean texts strongly indicates their shamanistic roots. This is because, in this set of beliefs, all planes functioned in a horizontal space, interpenetrating and interacting with each other. The indeterminacy of it all may stem from a thought that for the ancient Koreans, the afterlife looked the same as their everyday life. In addition, legends related to the afterlife may indicate this. In *The Tale of Princess Bari*, considered the most important of these stories, the possibility of traveling between worlds is clearly shown. The kingdom *Bari* reaches brings her not only a miraculous treasure with which she can heal her parents, magic bells that give her power over the dead, but also a husband who is part of the afterlife. Thanks to his journey to the *Yeomra* kingdom, *Gangnim* is granted the status of Grim Reaper, which allows him to move peacefully between the worlds of the living and the dead. In *Song of Heoungaegi*, it is once again emphasized how thinly the boundary separates these two planes and how little is needed to be able to cross it. Moreover, shamanistic rituals still preserved today on the Korean Peninsula also emphasize this fact. Each of the deities to whom the rituals are addressed appears in the world of the living. The obstacles they must overcome on their way are not magical but more natural, again suggesting the closeness of the two dimensions. In addition, *Jinogi gut* and the role played by the Grim Reaper in it suggest the original meaning of death in Korean culture, which on its own contained a humorous dimension aimed at cleansing the mourners of trauma and grief. It seems, then, that death in Korean culture is similar in nature to life in the sense of a path that must be traveled so that man can complete the cycle that is his continuance in the universe.

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