

## KOREAN SHAMANISM TODAY

**GRADES:** 11-12

**AUTHOR:** Jennifer Burns

**SUBJECT:** Religion

**TIME REQUIRED:** One 90-minute class period

**OBJECTIVES:**

- To understand the basic tenets of Korean Shamanism and the kut
- To explain why Korean Shamanism still is popular today

**STANDARDS:**

**NCSS Standards:**

Standard 1: Culture

**Common Core Standards:**

RH2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source

RH 7 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g. visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

SL1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions

SL 2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media

**MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- Handout: Excerpt from *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life* by Laurel Kendall
- Handout: New York Times article “In the age of the Internet, Korean shamans regain popularity” by Choe Sang-Hun and discussion questions
- Computer access for video clip: Korean Shaman (무당) - Possession by the Spirit of Changun  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRIUy2dyBQA>
- Internet access for the Gahoe Museum  
[http://www.gahoemuseum.org/000\\_english/02\\_collection/index.html](http://www.gahoemuseum.org/000_english/02_collection/index.html) and/or pictures of Shaman rituals <http://www.socwel.ku.edu/candagrants/Gallery/HFC-Thumbnail/Korean%20Shamanism/Korean%20Shaminism%20page.htm> (if internet access is not readily available, selected photos and pictures of artifacts may be printed out and copied ahead of time)
- Worksheet on Korean Shamanism

## **BACKGROUND:**

Korean Shamanism is one of the many religions in Korea but the only native belief system to the peninsula. The shaman tradition predates Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity in Korea but has proven to be surprisingly adaptable to modern life. It is important to remember that religion in Korea and much of East Asia is not a “sum-zero” game but rather will often involve people maintaining traditions from multiple religions and philosophies. One does not need to identify themselves as a follower of shamanism to ask for a shaman’s help.

Korean shamanism has much in common with shamanism in northern Asia including Siberia. The shaman in Korea (and elsewhere) is a bridge between the spirit world and the earthly world. The spirits, often of deceased ancestors, can interact with people and cause them good fortune or pain and misfortune. The shaman is able to ascertain what spirit is causing a problem and also knows how to calm that spirit. In the Korean tradition, the shaman will perform a ceremony known as a kut. The shaman in Korea is often female and, unlike many other cultures, a Korean shaman does not use any drugs to enter trances which allow her to communicate with the spirit world and perform feats that otherwise would be difficult (eg. standing on sharp objects). These trances in the ceremonies, or kuts, allow her to help clients by creating a new balance and peace between them and the surrounding spirits.

The Korean shaman, called mudang, purposefully lives on the fringe of society. The path to become a shaman is not an easy one. The first sign that a person is perhaps destined for the life of a shaman is a shinbyong, or “spirit sickness.” There are physical and psychological symptoms of this spirit sickness which do not appear to be treatable by modern medicine including loss of appetite and hallucinations. The only “cure” of this sickness is to enter in a special narim kut to become a shaman. During a kut, a shaman is often dressed in bright colors with a special hat. She uses bells, a drummer and symbolic weapons like swords and tridents during the ceremony. There are a variety of different kuts including those for good harvests, the death of a loved one, the initiation of a new shaman, the good fortune of the village and to solve a personal problem (sickness, marriage troubles etc.).

Korean Shamanism has been influenced by Korean history. The pantheon of gods and spirits have come to include religious figures like Buddha and Jesus and generals—even the American General MacArthur. There are also examples of shaman-Buddhist shrines that show the co-existence of religion in Korea. Many see the popularity of Protestant Christianity in Korea as a result of a shamanist past. The huge fortune telling business in Korea is also seen as an extension of shamanism.

## **PROCEDURE:**

- 1) Brainstorm together on the board what students already know about shamanism. Then have them predict in small groups what they would expect shamanism to be like in

Korea. They can answer the questions on their worksheet in the middle column (Answers before the activity). You may wish to go over these predictions as a class.

- 2) Show video clip on a shaman ceremony. Have students record information they have learned on the worksheet. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRIUy2dyBQA>
- 3) Hand out the Excerpt from *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Sprits: Women in Korean Ritual Life* by Laurell Kendall. Have them record information they have learned on the worksheet.
- 4) Allow students to explore the shaman museum and art connected to shamanism in Korea at [http://www.gahoemuseum.org/000\\_english/02\\_collection/index.html](http://www.gahoemuseum.org/000_english/02_collection/index.html) and/or pictures of some shaman rituals in Korea <http://www.socwel.ku.edu/candagrantsGallery/HFC-Thumbnail/Korean%20Shamanism/Korean%20Shaminism%20page.htm>. They will be recording additional information on the worksheet as they explore the site. If you don't have computer access, you may wish to print out some pictures ahead of time and allow them to look at these pictures in small groups.
- 5) Hand out New York Times article "In the age of the Internet, Korean shamans regain popularity" by Choe Sang-Hun. Allow time for students to read individually and add to their worksheets. At this point, go over the answers with the class for the last column (Answers after the activity).
- 6) Lastly, discuss the questions given either in small groups or as a whole class. You may want to have students to respond to one of the discussion questions in paragraph form after the discussion. Have students discuss what role they think Shamanism plays in contemporary society and how it interacts with other religions such as Buddhism, and Christianity.

### **ASSESSMENT:**

Formative assessment: in-class discussion

Summative assessment: Optional response paragraph to one of the discussion questions; Student worksheets may be collected

### **RESOURCES:**

Cain, Geoffrey. "Modern shamans all the rage in S Korea." Feb 7, 2010. <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/south-korea/100125/shamanism-mudangs?page=0,1> (accessed Aug 8, 2010).

Canda, Edward. "SPIRITUAL DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL WORK RESOURCE CENTER." 2010. <http://www.socwel.ku.edu/candagrantsGallery/HFC->

Thumbnail/Korean%20Shamanism/Korean%20Shaminism%20page.htm (accessed Aug 8, 2010).

Clark, Donald. *Culture and Customs of Korea*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Fenkl, Heinz I. "Dancing on Knives: An Introduction to the Politics of Sexuality and Gender in Korean Shamanism." 1989.<http://heinzinsufenkl.net/knives.html> (accessed Aug 8, 2010).

"Gahoe Museum." 2002.[http://www.gahoemuseum.org/000\\_english/02\\_collection/index.html](http://www.gahoemuseum.org/000_english/02_collection/index.html) (accessed Aug 8, 2010).

Kendall, Laurel. *Shamans, Housewives and Other Restless Spirits*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.

"Korean Shaman (무당)- Possession by the Spirit of Changun." Sept 25, 2007.<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRIUy2dyBQA> (accessed Aug 8, 2010).

Sang-Hun, Choe. "In the age of the Internet, Korean shamans regain popularity." July 8, 2007.[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/06/world/asia/06iht-shaman.1.6527738.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/06/world/asia/06iht-shaman.1.6527738.html?_r=2&pagewanted=2) (accessed Aug 8, 2010).

"Shamanism." 2009-2010.[http://www.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/AK/AK\\_EN\\_1\\_4\\_8\\_3.jsp](http://www.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/AK/AK_EN_1_4_8_3.jsp) (accessed Aug 8, 2010).

## HANDOUT 1: SHAMANISM WORKSHEET

	Answers before the activity	Answers after the activity
Who are Korean shamans? How do they dress for a ceremony/kut?		
How does one become a shaman in Korea?		
What role do shamans play in Korean life?		
What does a shaman ceremony/kut look like? Who is involved?		
Who goes to a Korean shaman for help? For what reasons?		
What types of amulets/talismans are connected with Korean shamanism? What are they for?		

**HANDOUT 2: EXCERPT FROM *SHAMANS, HOUSEWIVES, AND OTHER RESTLESS SPIRITS* BY LAUREL KENDALL**

A large cast of characters will appear during the Chǒn family *kut*. It includes:

*The Shamans*

**The Chatterbox Mansin** -- Grandmother Chǒn's regular shaman, and the organizer of the *kut*

**Okkyōng 's Mother** -- The Chatterbox Mansin's apprentice "spirit daughter"

**Yongsu 's Mother**

**The Town Mansin**

*The Household*

**Grandfather Chǒn** -- the old man whose illness is the primary reason for this *kut*

**Grandmother Chǒn** -- Grandfather Chǒn's second wife

*The Family*

**The son** -- Grandfather Chǒn's child by his first wife

**The daughter-in-law** -- the son's wife

**Their children** -- Grandfather and Grandmother Chǒn's grandchildren

*Kin*

**The daughter** -- Grandfather Chǒn's married daughter by his first wife

**The maternal aunt** -- Grandmother Chǒn's own sister

**The paternal aunt** -- Grandfather Chǒn's sister

*The Women*

**The friend** -- Grandmother Chǒn's friend from her natal village, the paternal aunt's neighbor

**Women who live in the Chǒns' neighborhood**

*The Ancestors*

**Parents** -- Grandfather Chǒn's father and mother, father-in-law and mother-in-law to Grandmother Chǒn

**Wife** -- Grandfather Chǒn's first wife, mother of the son and daughter

Text Source:

Kendall, Laurel. *Shamans, Housewives and Other Restless Spirits*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.

### HANDOUT 3: SHAMANISM WORKSHEET—ANSWER KEY

	Answers after the activity
Who are Korean shamans? How do they dress?	<b>Korean shamans are typically women. They can be young or old. Some shamans are men, but this is much less common. There are over 300,000 shamans in Korea. They dress in a bright colored dress with a black hat for ceremonies and usually hold symbolic weapons like tridents and knives in their hands.</b>
How does one become a shaman in Korea?	<b>Korean shamans typically do not desire to become a shaman but feel pulled to the role after suffering a “spirit-sickness.” This sickness often comes after a tragedy in the shaman-to-be’s personal life. The “spirit-sickness” can only be cured by the sufferer becoming a shaman. It cannot be cured through modern medicine and often the sickness lasts for years. There is a special kut that is required as the new shaman’s initial rite.</b>
What role do shamans play in Korean life?	<b>The shamans bring of peace and comfort to those in need. The role is similar to that of a priest or other religious leader. The shaman acts as an intermediary between this world and the spirit world. In this way, the shaman is similar to a psychic or medium. Fortune-telling is a popular aspect of shamanism in the modern age.</b>
What does a shaman ceremony look and sound like? Who is involved?	<b>A kut is a shaman ceremony. There are many women and family members involved in the ceremony. If the ceremony is for a male, he may be present as well. There may be more than one shaman at a ceremony. There is music (cymbals and drums). The shaman will work herself into a trance where she may be possessed by a spirit. She may act and talk like the spirit—which may be male or female. To prove her power and connection with the spirit world, she may stand on knives. The ceremony takes places outdoors and brightly colored flags are often used. There is typically a food offering—often a pig—at the ceremony.</b>
Who goes to a Korean shaman for help? For what reasons?	<b>Shamans are popular in both cities and rural areas in Korea. Since there are 300,000 shaman and very few people who identify themselves as practicing shamanism, we can conclude that many people who consult shamans practice other faiths or not at all. Often times highly educated “non-believers” will consult a shaman as well as for blessings, help with a problem (sickness or marriage troubles). Shamans can perform a kut for a village or a single person.</b>
What types of amulets/talismans are connected with Korean shamanism? How are they used?	<b>Amulets include hair and teeth of tigers, pictures, carvings, locks, and mandalas. These are used to protect the person from evil spirits, encourage good luck and, sometimes, fertility.</b>

#### **HANDOUT 4: "IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET, KOREAN SHAMANS REGAIN POPULARITY" BY CHOE SANG-HUN**

**SEOUL** — Yang Soon Im says she has been communicating with the spirits of mountains and ancient warriors since she was seven. But it was only 25 years ago, she said, when her son miraculously survived a knife wound, that she felt she had no choice but to become the spirits' full-time channel with the living - a mudang, or shaman.

"I found her sitting on the roof chanting at 4 a.m.," her husband, Choi Jong Sam, 62, said. "She was puffing away at four packs of cigarettes. She said her mountain gods had saved our son in a sort of bargain. I slapped her face to help her get her wits back.

"Then her eyes blazed like those of a wild dog about to bite a man."

The deal Yang struck with her spirits eventually paid off in other ways. Now 60, she is one of the most sought-after shamans in Seoul - a leading member of a profession that has survived centuries of ridicule and persecution and is now enjoying a seemingly incongruous revival in one of the world's most technologically advanced countries.

Seoul is among the most relentlessly modern cities of Asia, with high-speed Internet and plasma TV sets. But an estimated 300 shamanistic temples nestle in hills less than an hour from the city center, and the clamorous ceremony known as gut (pronounced "goot") is a daily routine. The shamans offer a pig to placate the gods. They dance with toy guns to comfort the spirit of a dead child. They intimidate evil spirits by walking barefoot on knife blades.

"We used to do our rituals in hiding. Our customers kept it secret from even their own relatives," said Yang, who performs two or three rites on a busy day. "Now we have no shame performing in public. I can hardly take three days off a month."

Korean shamanism is rooted in ancient indigenous beliefs shared by many folk religions in northeast Asia. Most mudangs are women who say they discovered their ability to serve as a mediator between the human and spirit worlds after emerging from a critical illness. They believe that the air is thick with spirits, including those of dead relatives, a fox in the hills behind a village, an old tree or even a stove. These spirits interact with people and influence their fortunes.

Thus when traditionally minded Koreans are inexplicably sick or have a run of bad luck in business or a daughter who cannot find a husband, they consult a shaman.



"If I contact the spirit of a man who died of stomach cancer, I get stomach pains for days," said Kim Hong Kyung, 33, who has conducted rituals with Yang. "If I deal with the spirit of a woman who died during labor, my belly balloons like a pregnant woman's."

In an election year, like this one, the most famous shamans are fully booked. Politicians, whether Christian or Buddhist, flock to them, asking, for instance, whether relocating their ancestors' remains to a more propitious site might ensure victory.

"Look around," said Kim Myung Soon, 41, a husky mudang who, in a recent ritual, decapitated a chicken with her bare hands. "So much of nature has been ruined. Spirits of trees and rocks are displaced and haunt humans because they have nowhere else to go. No wonder the country is a mess."

Shamans were demonized by Christian missionaries and driven underground during Japanese colonial rule. The military governments that followed the Korean War disparaged them as charlatans and often banished them from villages, burning their shrines. But today, even many who regard shamanism as superstition acknowledge it to be an important repository of Korean culture, because the rituals have preserved traditional costumes, music and dance forms. Recent governments have documented and promoted the rituals as "intangible cultural assets."

There are an estimated 300,000 shamans, or one for every 160 South Koreans, according to the Korea Worshipers Association, which represents shamans. They are fiercely independent, following different gods, sharing no one body of scriptures. And they are highly adaptable. When the Internet boom hit South Korea, shamans were among the first to set up commercial Web sites, offering online fortunetelling. Many younger shamans maintain blogs on the Internet.

"In our latest survey, we found 273 categories of gods venerated by Korean shamans. If you look into the subcategories, you find 10,000 deities," said Hong Tea Han, a professor at Chung-Ang University in Seoul who researches shamanism. "Korean shamanism is a great melting pot. It never rejected anything but embraced everything, making endless compromises with other religions and social changes. That explains why it has survived thousands of years."

There are shamans who venerate Jesus, the Virgin Mary, even Park Chung Hee, the late South Korean military strongman. Under the pro-American military governments of the 1970s, there were shamans who took General Douglas MacArthur as their deity. When MacArthur's spirit possessed them, they donned sunglasses, puffed on a pipe and uttered sounds that some clients took for English.

"Until perhaps 10 or 15 years ago, we had quite a few shamans who prayed before the MacArthur statue here," said Aegibosal, a shaman in Incheon, the port city where MacArthur's troops made their legendary landing in 1950. "You don't see any of them any more."

Shamanism's eclecticism has influenced Korean attitudes toward religion, helping make South Korea one of the world's most pluralistic countries, said Yang Jong Sung, a senior curator at the National Folklore Museum of Korea.

Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity coexist peacefully. Koreans, regardless of religious affiliation, perform Confucian rites for dead ancestors. Christmas and Buddha's birthday are national holidays. Christians climb mountains at night, when spiritual power is believed strongest, and pray for their children to pass college entrance exams, their husbands to win bigger contracts or for the United States to deter another North Korean invasion.

"Korean shamanism is very, very materialistic and this-worldly, as Koreans tend to be," the curator Yang said. "I don't think a Christian pastor can succeed here if he only talks about heaven and does not hint at health and material prosperity."

Yang, the shaman, was born to a landlord's family in southwestern Korea. At an early age, she began saying things that her family could not decipher. Her parents removed her from school and locked her at home.

"I ran away and would wander in the hills for days chanting," Yang said. "My parents beat me for that, but I couldn't help it."

A village shaman said the girl was destined also to become a shaman. Her grandmother built her a shrine in a pine grove behind their village. Eventually, she attracted fame. Older shamans carried her on their backs to other villages to tell fortunes. The girl was paid in rice or sweets, but her father threw them away.

When Yang married to Choi 38 years ago, she tried to detach herself from her spirits. Then the family cow died and their house mysteriously collapsed. The couple moved to Seoul.

"I washed dishes in restaurants," Yang said. "But I found myself awake and crying at dawn. The spirits would not leave me alone."

In a recent ritual, Yang and two associates spent hours carefully stacking their altar with fruits, dried fish and rice cakes. They decorated their room with portraits of gods and unpacked a suitcase full of brightly colored costumes they changed into at different stages of the rite.

Their customer, a 51-year-old nurse, wanted the shamans' help in getting a divorce from her unfaithful husband. Instead, for 5 million won, or \$5,400, the shamans promised to help them reconcile.

Yang's diagnosis: the husband had turned into a "horsefly that sucks bone-marrow out of your spine," because the couple had been cursed by a baby she had aborted, an uncle who committed suicide and a well her family had filled years before.

"You'd kill your husband if you had a pistol with a silencer, wouldn't you?" Yang shrieked at her client. "But remember! The animal called man always returns to his wife, as the dog returns home at dusk. The spirits say they will help you this time."

Yang and the nurse embraced and sobbed when the nurse's dead mother, whom she had not mentioned to the shamans, spoke through Yang. Then Yang's younger associate, Chung Joon Ha, 42, a former army sergeant, danced with knives and a lump of raw pork in his mouth, his eyes rolling back into the sockets.

"We are like a hospital," he said afterwards. "We do surgery on people's bad luck."

Sang-Hun, Choe. "In the age of the Internet, Korean shamans regain popularity." July 8, 2007.[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/06/world/asia/06iht-shaman.1.6527738.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/06/world/asia/06iht-shaman.1.6527738.html?_r=2&pagewanted=2) (accessed Aug 8, 2010).

## DOCUMENT 5: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is Korean shamanism different than you expected it to be? What do you think the reasons are for those differences?
2. What most surprised you about Korean shamanism? What do you find most interesting about it?
3. Why do you think shamanism, an ancient belief system, is still popular in a modernized Korea?
4. Compare Korean shamanism with another belief system with which you are familiar or one which we have already studied. What similarities do you see?
5. Do you believe in good and bad luck? Why or why not? How does that belief or lack thereof affect you in everyday life?
6. If you believe that Korean shamans aren't actually contacting the spirit world, what do you think explains their success and popularity?
7. What is the significance of a Korean shaman's gender? How can being a female help them with their shaman duties and/or drive them into this role?
8. What activities do modern Americans participate in that might fulfill some of the same desires as those in Korea do through a shaman?
9. If you had the opportunity to meet a Korean shaman or someone who has consulted a shaman in Korea, what would you want to ask them?