

The Tradition of Sacrificial Rituals for the East Sea in Korea

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In relation to East Sea, there has been many myths and legends, many gods and goddess and many sacrifices for them all through the Korean history. These made the Sea sacred and great in the hearts of Koreans, and constituted an origin of the Korean folk culture.

The sacrificial rituals for East Sea would be classified as 3 categories, national rituals, community rituals and people's individual ones. The national sacrificial rituals to the East Sea were conducted annually and formally in Confucian rituals by the government. The community sacrifices have been done annually by the village members at the East Sea coast with the mixed rituals of Confucianism and shamanism, usually named *byeolsin-gut* (別神炁). Those were handed down today to be a community festivals in many places. The people's individual sacrifices usually have been done by the shaman, sometimes done by the common people themselves at any time anywhere with no fixed forms at the seashore.

Observing these sacrificial rituals, we can say the East Sea was not a mere natural being but a mighty god which was attracted and worshipped by Korean people. Though it's a general culture for many peoples to worship natural objects in premodern ages, the sacrificial rituals paid to the East Sea was a very unique and significant cultural activity in Korea.

Through these culture of rituals, we would find the significance and the holiness of East Sea and the name. It has been used by Koreans as an endonym for thousands of years. So the name *East Sea* is very natural for the global use.

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1. Introduction

The place names including sea names are what have been named naturally through the long history with the people. They are not what were invented artificially and tentatively by a government or an individual for political purpose. We call these true names endonym, which we should respect as a fact itself.

Though the *East Sea* (Donghae, 東海) was originally named because of the location, the east of Korean peninsula, it has been a proper noun for two thousand years. It has been used by Koreans as an endonym for thousands of years. So the name *East Sea* has been very natural and familiar to Korean people for a long time.

The East Sea has been so sacred and significant for Koreans as to worship and pay sacrifices for thousands of years. So there have been many myths and legends of the East Sea gods or the dragon kings of the East Sea. This paper is focused on the rituals paid to them.

Observing these sacrificial rituals, we can say the East Sea was not a mere natural being but a mighty god which was attracted and worshipped by Korean people. Though it's a general culture for many people to worship natural objects in premodern ages, the sacrificial rituals paid to the East Sea for a long time was a very unique and significant cultural activity in Korea.

2. National sacrificial rituals for the East Sea

The place names including sea names are what have been named naturally through the long history with the people. They are not what were invented artificially and tentatively by a government or an individual for political purpose. We call these true names endonym, which we should respect as a fact itself.

In ancient times in East Asia, the sacrificial rituals were very important to pay for mountains, rivers and seas at a national level or a community level. It was also the same case in western countries as ancient Greece and Rome to worship Poseidon, the god of the sea.

According the official history, the national level sacrifices to the East Sea in Korea were conducted from 7th century in the unified Silla dynasty. The national sacrificial ritual system was developed in ancient China, which was imported to Korea in the era of Three Kingdoms. Paying rituals to the seas were on the second level of the ritual scale in the system. For these rituals, altars for sacrifice were constructed in various places.

The altar for the East Sea was located on the coast at Heunghae in Gyeongbuk province. The altar for the South Sea was on the coast at Dongnae in Pusan city, the one for the West Sea was on the coast at Gunsan and the one for the North Sea at Samcheok city.¹ Except for the altar for sacrifice for the West Sea, all altars were located on the East Coast of the Korean peninsula in today's terms. One was on the north coast of the East Sea, one on the mid coast, one toward the south east coast. In this point, we can see people of Silla had great faith and inspiration from the East Sea. So we can say three out of four rituals paid to the seas in the Silla era were paid to the East Sea.

In the Goryeo Dynasty the paying of sacrificial rituals to mountains, rivers and seas continued, but they were excluded from the national ritual system at the beginning. However at a later stage they were reinstated as a third level ritual.² The rituals for the East Sea was carried out a little further north at Yangyang (襄陽) in Gangwon province (江原道), where a shrine was constructed instead of an altar for sacrifice. They named this shrine 'the shrine for the East Sea' or 'the shrine for the Dragon King of the East Sea.' The reason they built the shrine at Yangyang was that it was located directly east of Goryeo's capital Gaegyeong (開京).

In 1414 the national ritual system was reorganized by King Taejong (太宗) of the new dynasty Joseon(朝鮮). Here rituals to the seas including the East Sea were elevated to the second level as important rituals. Twice every year, in February and August, the king sent officials to conduct the rituals.³

The shrine for the East Sea was located at the east coast at Yangyang the same as in the Goryeo Dynasty.⁴ The shrine for the South Sea was located at the south coast of Naju in Jeolla province, the one for the West Sea was at the west coast of Pungcheon in Hwanghae province, however rituals for the North Sea were abolished. The silk gifts to the seas at the rituals were distinguished by color, dark blue for the East Sea, red for the South Sea, white for the West Sea.⁵

¹ 『三國史記』 권 32, 雜志 1, 祭祀

² “四月戊申, 合祭己卯年幸三角山, 所過名山大川于開城及楊州”(『高麗史』 권 63, 志 17, 禮 5, 吉禮小祀, 雜祀).

³ 『太宗實錄』 14년 8월 21일 辛酉.

⁴ 『世宗實錄』 地理志, 江原道 襄陽都護府

⁵ 『世宗實錄』 五禮志 吉禮序例 神位

Not only were the rituals for mountains, rivers, seas, including the god of the East Sea conducted at the locations mentioned but also they were conducted jointly at Seoul, Weungu-dan (圓丘壇, Tiandan 天壇 or Nam-dan 南壇), the Round Altar for heaven, and Sancheon-dan (山川壇, Didan 地壇 or Buk-dan 北壇), the Square Altar for earth.⁶ Although the rituals at Round Altar were abolished after King Sejong's reign, the rituals at the Square Altar altar continued until the end of Joseon dynasty. Especially during persistent droughts, as rituals for the rain were conducted here.⁷

After 1456 the shrine for the East Sea at Yangyang was moved to Gangleung (江陵) for a while and rituals were conducted there. The shrine for the West Sea was moved to Incheon, the shrine for the South Sea was moved to Suncheon and rituals were conducted there. The reason the shrines were moved was to align directions with the newly moved capital, Seoul.⁸ After that the shrine for the East Sea was moved to Jeongdong (accurate East) in Gangleung for a while, then it was moved back to Yangyang in 1536.

3. Community sacrifices for the East Sea god

There have been many sacrifices for the East Sea god in the villages, towns and even cities on the east coast. The sacrifice rituals which are usually conducted by the shamans are called 'Byeolsin-gut', the 'East Sea Byeolsin-gut', 'sacrifice for the dragon king' or 'sacrifice for good fishing.' There are small shrines of community god and goddess for the sacrifices in the villages. But no shrines were built for the dragon kings because they are always there in the East Sea.

The purposes of the sacrifices are to pray for the welfare of the village, good harvest in the sea, safety of the ships and to prevent natural disasters and all kind of devils. The rituals are interesting, profuse and joyful enough to be a big community festivals. They have been done for more than a thousand years and handed down to continue even today. The sacrifice rituals of the east coast villages were designated as Korean cultural relics to preserve by the government and the communities.

⁶ 東海神을 배향한 園丘壇의 제사의식은 『世祖實錄』 10년, 1월 15일 戊辰 條에 자세히 실려 있다.

⁷ 『世宗實錄』 五禮志 吉禮序例 神位 및 <時早北郊望祈嶽海濱及諸山川儀>

⁸ 『世祖實錄』 2년 3월 28일 정유.

The sacrifices 'Byeolsin-gut' on the east coast are a kind of village rituals, which are rather different from those of inland. The latter is done only for the village god and conducted in Confucian rituals, but the former is done as an integrate sacrifice for many gods such as the village god, the house god, the dragon king, the ancestral spirits, Buddha, the shaman's god and others. So the rituals would be practiced in sequence for several days with the mixed rituals of Confucianism and shamanism. The main sacrifice would be presented for the dragon king, the East Sea god. So the village sacrifices are practiced at the seashore in long term usually a week and more. So they need a large amount of funds which was raised by the village members according to their property. The functions look like amazing village festivals lasting several days with wines, foods, music, songs, dances and dramas.

The formalities of the village sacrifices in the east coast are various and not unified but they have similarities in outline. The rituals begin with the exercise of purgation and then many sacrifices would be rolled on in sequence for several days. The general order would be the sacrifice for the village god, the exorcise of the reconciliation to gods with human, the sacrifice for Buddha, the sacrifice for the ancestral spirits, the sacrifice for the house god, the sacrifice for the god of heaven, the exercise for Shimcheong who was a filial daughter drawn in the sea for her blind father, the exorcise of bronze jar, the exorcise for the smallpox spirits, the exorcise for the shaman's gods.

And at last would be the sacrifice for the dragon king which is done in a great scale. The scale reflects the significance of the function. So we can say dragon king of the East Sea has been the main god of the people living in the east coast for a long time. In reality a sacrifice and an exercise are not distinguishable and conducted in same ways by the Shaman. Though the terms are sorted out to call a big one as sacrifice, a small one as exorcise in this paper.

Though a village sacrifice has been changed its character to be a village festival in later days, it was originally a religious ritual. A folk culture has contained the history, literature, thoughts and the spirits of a country. We would see the significant meanings of the East Sea to Koreans through the sacrifice rituals for the dragon kings of the East Sea.

4. People's individual sacrifices for the East Sea god

There are some famous places for the people to worship the East Sea god, in which are known very miraculous to help them. The Bonggil beach in Gyeongju city and the Shinnam beach in Samcheok city are most famous for them. The former is newly developed but become tremendously popular to the shamans day by day.

It might have been caused by the rock in the sea, which has been known as the tomb of King Munmu in Silla dynasty, who had unified the 3 kingdoms at that time. As the king swore to be a dragon to defend his country from the Japanese pirates, his tomb was built in the East Sea at Bonggil near Kyeongju. So many people have believed he became a dragon king who sometimes has revealed on the seashore. So Bonggil beach would be the best place to meet the mighty dragon king and to have dialogues with him. The shamans would say they feel a great sacred energy there when they conduct the rituals there.

Nowaday the Bonggil beach became the famous place for the shamans to do their works and we can see many shamans and people praying and conducting their exorcism, a kind of sacrificial rituals, there almost every day. So the air on the beach is always covered with the smoke of the burning incense. The scenery would remind the riverside of Ganges in Varanasi, India, always covered with the smoke of cremation.

Some people do the exorcism to get rid of the evils and disasters in their lives. Some people do that to relieve the souls of their dead family members in hell and to move them to heaven. Others do that to pray long lives of children or to get fortune in their future lives. They usually accompany shamans who act the rituals or the exorcism for them as a spirit medium. Sometimes the shamans do their own rituals to earn the divine inspirations and energy of the sea.

There is an interesting story of mine with my Dragon Mother. I was born in a small hamlet near Ulsan city, 30km from the East Sea coast. When I was a little baby, I always ill with all kind of disease, too weak to be alive. So my grandmother decided to sell me to the Dragon Queen, which meant the adoption to her. There is a small pond named Dragon Pond, the water of which flows into a stream, then into the River Taehwa and then into the East Sea. Many people have believed the Dragon king or Queen comes to the pond from East Sea. Though my grandmother was not a shaman, she could pray and conduct small sacrifices to various gods.

One morning she went to the Dragon Pond with me and some dedications and conducted the sacrificial ritual of selling me to the Dragon Queen. She prayed to her piously, "I sold this baby to you, and you adopted. You care the baby, as he is your son from now." After that I became the son of the Dragon Mother and changed my name as Pal-Ryong, a kind of baptized name, which meant "a boy sold to Dragon." When I was child, on my birthday my grandmother used to accompany me to conduct the sacrificial ritual at the Dragon Pond and let me bow to Drago Mother whom I could not see. With the consequence, I was alive and had no other disease to be very healthy as it is till my age of sixty five. I recovered my original name Young Choon when I enter the elementary school. Though my home country is rather far from the sea, we had the belief of the East Sea god, the Dragon King and Queen. Then think of it how strong and widely spread would it be at the seashore villages!

People's individual sacrifices for the East Sea god have been done like this. We can say there are no fixed forms and protocols in the people's individual sacrifices. Anybody can do that in any way any time anywhere whatever they want to do. But generally speaking, the shamans lead the sacrifices to help their clients. However there are some common people who do it for themselves like my grandmother.

5. Conclusion

In relation to East Sea, there has been many myths and legends, many gods and goddess and many sacrifices for them all through the Korean history. These made the Sea sacred and great in the hearts of Koreans, and constituted an origin of the Korean folk culture.

The sacrificial rituals for East Sea would be classified as 3 categories, national rituals, community rituals and people's individual ones. The national sacrificial rituals to the East Sea were conducted annually and formally in Confucian rituals by the government. The community sacrifices have been done annually by the village members at the East Sea coast with the mixed rituals of Confucianism and shamanism, usually named Byeolsin-gut (別神爿). Those were handed down today to be a community festivals in many places. The people's individual sacrifices usually have been done by the shaman, sometimes done by the common people themselves at any time anywhere with no fixed forms at the seashore.

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국문요약

한국의 오랜 역사 속에서 東海에는 많은 신화와 전설, 神과 龍王이 창조되었고, 그들에 대한 제사가 행해졌다. 이러한 문화 요소들은 한국인들의 마음속에 동해를 신성하고 거룩하게 만들었으며, 한국 민속 문화를 형성하는 하나의 기원이 되기도 하였다.

동해에 대한 제사 의례는 3가지 범주, 즉 국가 차원의 제사, 지역 공동체 차원의 제사, 그리고 민중들의 개인적인 제사로 구별할 수 있다. 국가에서 행하는 제사는 정부에서 매년 정기적이고 공식적으로 유교식 제사 의례로 행하였다. 지역 공동체 제사는 동해 연안 지역 마을 주민들에 의해 정기적으로 행하였고, 그 의례는 유교 의례와 무속적 제사가 혼합된 형태가 많았는데 이들을 보통 '별신굿'이라고 부른다. 이들은 오늘날까지도 전승되어 많은 지역에서 주민들의 축제로 행해지고 있다. 동해에서 민중들이 개별적으로 행하는 제사는 보통 무당들이 대행하는 경우가 많지만 어떤 때는 일반인들 자신이 직접 행하기도 하는데, 그 의식은 정해진 형식이 없이 바닷가 어느 곳에서나 아무 때나 행하고 있다.

이러한 제사 의식을 보면 우리는 동해가 단지 하나의 자연물일 뿐이 아니라 한국인들이 오래 동안 정성을 바치고 숭배한 거룩한 神과 같은 것이었음을 알게 된다. 전근대 시대에 자연물을 숭배하는 것은 많은 민족들에게서 있었던 일반적인 문화 현상이기는 하지만, 한국에서 동해에 바쳤던 제사 의식은 매우 독특하고 중요한 문화 활동이었다.

이러한 제사의 문화를 통하여 우리는 동해의 신성성과 '동해'라는 이름의 중요성을 알 수 있다. '동해'는 수 천 년 동안 한국인들에 의해 토속 지명 (endonym)으로 사용되었다. 그래서 '동해'라는 이름은 세계인들이 사용하기에 매우 자연스러운 이름이며, 반드시 그렇게 사용되어야 한다.

주제어: 東海, 祭祀, 國歌祭祀, 祀典, 共同體祭祀, 土俗地名 (endonym), 祭壇, 東海神祠, 東海別神祭, 巫俗