

The Transmission Structure and Communal Identity of the Sanshinje in Yeonchuk-dong: An Oral History Approach

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines the Sanshinje (mountain spirit ritual) of Yeonchuk-dong, Daejeon, as a living form of folk belief embedded in communal practice.

Methodology: Based on 2025 oral history documentation, the research adopts folkloristic ethnography, symbolic interpretation, and community theory to analyze the ritual's structure and meaning.

Result: Findings show that the Sanshinje functions as a symbolic and ethical system sustaining collective identity and memory. The sacrificial use of a bull reflects regional uniqueness and communal solidarity. Institutional support through a preservation committee has enabled the ritual's continuity despite social change.

Implication: The study emphasizes the need to preserve Sanshinje as community-owned living heritage, maintaining authenticity while adapting to modern challenges.

1. Introduction

Traditional Korean folk beliefs have historically developed upon a foundational worldview that emphasizes the harmonious relationship among nature, humanity, and the community. Among such practices, the Sanshinje—a mountain spirit rite—is one of the most enduring and widely observed village rituals. It is premised on the belief that the mountain encircling the village is a sacred being, and the community offers seasonal rites to the Sanshin (mountain spirit) to pray for peace, prosperity, and protection. Over time, this ritual has manifested in diverse forms across the country, adapting to local customs and ecological contexts. More than a religious ceremony, the Sanshinje has served as a cultural mechanism that reinforces communal solidarity and collective identity within the village.

However, the rapid advancement of modernization and urbanization has increasingly threatened the intergenerational transmission of such localized belief systems. In many peri-urban areas, traditional ritual structures are weakening or disappearing altogether, and some communities now struggle

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to maintain the continuity of annual rites. Amid these challenges, the Sanshinje in Yeonchuk-dong, Daedeok-gu, Daejeon Metropolitan City, continues to be observed annually in early October of the lunar calendar, fully led and organized by local residents. This persistence renders the case of Yeonchuk-dong particularly noteworthy.

The Sanshinje of Yeonchuk-dong is held at a Sanjedang (mountain shrine) located mid-slope along the ridgeline of Mt. Gyejoksan. The ritual exhibits unique regional features, including the selection process of officiants, the preparation of offerings, and the sacrificial use of a live bull—a rare and symbolically potent practice. Additionally, local beliefs surrounding the ritual, modes of generational transmission, and the spatial and temporal symbolism embedded in the performance of the Sanshinje lend the ceremony a depth of cultural meaning that transcends its ritual form (Kang S-B, 2002, 2009).

This study focuses on the 2025 oral history publication *The Sanshinje of Yeonchuk-dong*, with the aim of analyzing how the Sanshinje is organized, practiced, and transmitted within the local community. By doing so, the research seeks to explore the social functions of the rite in sustaining folk religiosity and communal identity, while also reflecting on the contemporary value and necessity of preserving such intangible heritage in a rapidly changing society.

2. Literature Review

The Sanshinje (mountain spirit rite) has long served as a central ritual practice in Korean folk religion, particularly within village communities. As a symbolic enactment that reflects traditional conceptions of nature, the divine, and communal structure, the Sanshinje has garnered scholarly attention as a key form of localized sacred practice. Previous research has primarily focused on the structure, meaning, and transmission of the rite across various regions, with particular emphasis on its ritual format and sociocultural function. More recently, scholarship has expanded to consider the transformations of the Sanshinje in contemporary contexts and its viability in a changing cultural landscape.

A notable example is Kim Sun-jae (2023), who examined the Sanshinje of Beomgol Village in Nonsan and its relationship with place-name legends. His study compellingly argued that the Sanshinje functions as a mechanism for shaping collective memory and spatial identity, thus positioning the ritual not merely as a religious act but as a central narrative structure of the village's cultural imagination.

Philosophical interpretations have also emerged, such as Moon Dong-gyu's (2010) analysis of the Sanshin cult in the Jirisan region, which reconceptualized the ritual as a space of ontological harmony and idealized communication between humans and the divine. By reading the symbolic system of the rite through a philosophical lens, Moon expanded the hermeneutic scope of traditional ritual studies.

In another direction, Kang Seong-bok and Park Jong-ik (2010) analyzed the role of Sanshinje within community governance, focusing on the Sanhyang-gye (mountain ritual associations) of Taehwasan in Gongju. Their research demonstrated that the ritual operated as a social mechanism

for maintaining communal order. Kang Seong-bok (2011) further analyzed structural changes and secularization trends in the Donghae-ri Sanshinje, illustrating the adaptive capacities of traditional ritual in the face of social transformation.

Documentation-based studies such as Park Jong-ik (2009) have contributed to understanding the institutionalization of the Sanshinje. By juxtaposing oral accounts of the Museongsan Sanshinje with Daedonggye community documents, Park illuminated how folk religious practices become embedded in textual norms and local governance.

Regionally focused studies—such as Kang and Park’s (2010) analysis of Taehwasan’s Sanhyang-gye, Park and Kang’s (2013) oral history of Yanghwa-ri, and Kang Myeong-hye’s (2017, 2018) typologies in Gangwon Province—offer comparative frameworks. By contrast, this study underscores Yeonchuk-dong’s unique bull-sacrifice ritual as a case of regional ritual identity formation. Kang Myeong-hye (2017, 2018) analyzed Dongje rites in the mountainous areas of Gangwon Province, exploring their collective unconscious structures. Seo Young-sook (2007) investigated overlapping transmissions of Sanshin myths and rituals in Eumseong. Park and Kang (2013) reconstructed the Sanshinje of Yanghwa-ri, Sejong City through oral history, emphasizing intergenerational transmission and practice-based structure.

Urban case studies such as Kim Jong-dae (2009) revealed how Sanshinje has adapted within Seoul’s Heukseok-dong neighborhood, suggesting its function as a source of emergent urban communal identity. Likewise, Lee Jin-gyo (2017) examined an anti-wind power movement linked to the Sanshinje, illustrating how the ritual can be recontextualized as a space of sociopolitical discourse.

Research based specifically on oral histories, while still limited, has gained increasing attention. Choi Woon-sik (2004) analyzed the female embodiment of divinity in the case of the Jugryeong mountain shrine, while Park (2009) employed both oral and written sources to reveal the multi-layered structure of ritual transmission. These studies underscore the ethnographic potential of oral data in folk religion research.

From a comparative folkloristic perspective, studies such as Kim Deok-muk (2025) on mountain god beliefs around Mt. Fuji in Japan, and Bae Su-gyeong (2010) on the Pusayasae rite in northern Thailand, have demonstrated how Sanshinje-like practices function as pivotal expressions of local sacredness and communal formation. These works underscore the comparative relevance of Sanshinje within global discourses on ritual and heritage.

Collectively, this body of research has revealed the complexity of the Sanshinje as a cultural phenomenon, particularly with regard to its symbolic structure and community-based function. However, much of the scholarship remains centered on formal ritual structure or textual analysis. There is comparatively little focus on the lived experience and narrative memory of ritual practitioners. To address this gap, the present study draws on oral history data from the Sanshinje of Yeonchuk-dong to reconstruct the internal logic and sociocultural meanings of the rite. Through this approach, the research aims to illuminate how the Sanshinje continues to be practiced, interpreted, and transmitted within the local community.

3. Research Methodology and Source Materials

3.1 Primary Source

The principal data for this study is drawn from the oral history volume *The Sanshinje of Yeonchuk-dong*, published in February 2025 (compiled by Lim Ji-seon, directed by Noh Younghee). This source documents the longstanding Sanshinje ritual through the testimonies of four elder residents, selected based on their generational diversity, ritual involvement, and direct experiential knowledge. Among them were former ritual officiants and long-term participants who provided both procedural and reflective insights.—Jeong Jong-cheol, Jang Jin-cheol, Oh Eun-young, and Kim Sun-rye—who have participated directly in the ritual’s performance. Far from being a procedural record, these oral histories are approached as co-constructed narratives that reveal the ritual’s cultural logic and internal symbolism.

The oral histories were gathered through in-depth interviews and were later transcribed—not merely as documentation, but as epistemic sources of ritual meaning. They are treated as co-narrated accounts through which cultural logic and collective memory are actively constituted. The interviews captured not only the structure and sequence of the ritual, but also recollections from earlier decades alongside current practices, enabling a layered analysis of temporal continuity and transformation. These elements reveal how the Sanshinje encodes communal values and structures social memory.. Importantly, the source material is not a retrospective chronicle of a fading tradition but a vivid record of a living ritual still practiced today, thus offering a compelling perspective on the continuity and evolving relevance of Korean folk belief.

3.2 Methodological Framework

This study employs a folkloristic ethnographic methodology to examine the linguistic, mnemonic, and performative dimensions of the Sanshinje as experienced by ritual practitioners. Rather than reducing the ritual to a fixed cultural form or institutional template, the analysis centers on the lived perspectives of the ritual agents, interpreting the meanings and functions of the rite as they are articulated by the participants themselves. Three analytical frameworks guide the interpretation:

First, the folkloristic ethnographic approach emphasizes the internal cultural logic of the community, particularly as conveyed through oral narratives, customs, and embodied practices (Lee Jin-gyo, 2017). Within this framework, the testimonies concerning the Sanshinje are treated as narratives of memory, revealing not only the ritual’s formal elements but also the emotions, taboos, and ethical codes embedded within its enactment. The worldview of the villagers, who regard the Sanshinje as a sacred moment capable of altering the fate of the community, emerges clearly through the oral record. This affirms the ritual’s function as an ongoing practice of belief, rather than a static tradition (Ahn, 2015).

Second, the symbolic interpretive framework is employed to analyze the constellation of symbols through which the Sanshinje renders the relationship between the divine, the human, and the natural world. Particular attention is paid to the symbolic meanings of the offerings (e.g., ox head, tricolor

thread, seaweed soup), the ritual space (the Sanjedang shrine), the temporal setting (midnight), and natural features such as the sacred spring and decayed pine tree. Applying Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology and Turner's (1969) ritual symbolism, this analysis clarifies how cultural meanings are embodied and enacted through the Sanshinje's symbolic system.

Third, a communitarian perspective is adopted to explore the Sanshinje as a central mechanism of social cohesion and moral order. The ethical norms governing the selection of ritual officiants, the deliberative structures of village meetings, and the organized role of the Sanshinje Preservation Committee all point to the institutional embeddedness of the ritual within community governance. This study draws on Mary Douglas's (1970) theory of ritual and Emile Durkheim's (1912) concept of collective rites to assess how the Sanshinje contributes to communal integration and the reproduction of shared social values in Yeonchuk-dong.

4. Oral Narratives, Ritual Transmission, and Collective Identity

The Sanshinje of Yeonchuk-dong functions not merely as a ritual event but as a multilayered cultural practice that encapsulates the village's belief system, ethical order, and mechanisms for constructing communal identity. Drawing on the oral histories recorded in the 2025 ethnographic compilation, this chapter investigates how the Sanshinje is symbolically interpreted by the villagers, how its transmission practices reinforce communal norms, and how its institutional foundations contribute to the structural maintenance of the community.

4.1 The Meaning-Making of Sanshinje in Oral Memory

The perception of the Sanshinje among Yeonchuk-dong residents transcends conventional notions of ancestral rites. In repeated testimonies, oral narrators asserted that "the village remained at peace because the Sanshinje was properly performed," expressing a firm belief in a causal link between ritual performance and communal well-being. This suggests the presence of a collective narrative structure that positions the Sanshinje as the ontological foundation for the village's continued existence.

As such, the ritual is re-enacted within the realm of memory, functioning as a cultural device that validates and extends the historical continuity of the village. The oral testimonies justify the necessity of the rite through its perceived efficacy—namely, the "absence of calamity." This functional memory operates as an ethicalized recollection, transforming the ritual into a shared normative obligation that must be upheld by all members of the community.

4.2 Modes of Intergenerational Transmission and Internalized Norms

The transmission of the Sanshinje in Yeonchuk-dong involves more than the inheritance of external procedures; it constitutes a complex educational process through which communal order and cosmology are passed on to successive generations. Those selected as ritual officiants (jegwan) are expected not only to possess auspicious physiognomy (saenggi bokdeok) but also to maintain a state of

physical and mental purity. This expectation serves as a cultural mechanism that aligns individual ethics with the village's sacred order. During the preparatory period, participants observe ritual abstinence, ritual bathing (mok-yok-jae-gae), and the avoidance of specific foods—all of which internalize traditional moral codes into everyday practice.

Furthermore, elders actively transmit practical ritual knowledge—such as folding soji (ritual paper), selecting auspicious dates (gil-il), and purifying spring water—through both verbal instruction and participatory practice. This transmission exceeds technical skill acquisition; it reinforces communal ethics of inclusivity (“no one is to be excluded; all must participate”) and egalitarianism before the divine, thus reinforcing both ritual and social cohesion.

4.3 Institutionalization Through the Sanshinje Preservation Committee

Since the early 2000s, the Sanshinje in Yeonchuk-dong has undergone formal institutionalization with the establishment of a Sanshinje Preservation Committee. The committee oversees all practical aspects of the ritual—including the selection of officiants, preparation of offerings, financial contributions, and maintenance of the sanjedang (mountain shrine)—and serves as the core body organizing voluntary participation among residents.

Operating under formal bylaws, the committee convenes annual general meetings, manages shared ritual funds through community dues, and seeks to elevate public awareness of the Sanshinje. In doing so, the committee materializes the community's intent to preserve collective memory as cultural heritage. It also represents a strategic cultural intervention aimed at embedding the continuity of tradition within a modern institutional framework.

4.4 Ritual Governance and the Administrative System of the Village

The Sanshinje in Yeonchuk-dong is not merely a religious observance; it constitutes a foundational component of the village's governance system. The timing and execution of the ritual are decided collectively through village assemblies, while the selection of officiants and assistants reflects communal ethics, social hierarchy, and shared cosmology. In this respect, the Sanshinje serves as the village's symbolic constitution and as a regulatory rite of collective order.

The institutionalization of the ritual reflects a shift from memory-based continuity to system-based sustainability. This transformation signals the transition of the Sanshinje from an invisible faith system to a visible system of cultural heritage—a process in which belief, identity, and communal infrastructure are intricately interwoven.

5. Symbolism and Regional Cultural Value of the Sanshinje in Yeonchuk-dong

The Sanshinje of Yeonchuk-dong should not be viewed as a mere assemblage of customary procedures or ritualized formalities. Rather, it constitutes a comprehensive symbolic system in which the moral order of the community and the performative structure of its values are fully articulated.

This chapter analyzes the ritual's cultural significance by focusing on the symbolic function of the sacrificial ox, the ritualized relationships among the Sanshin (mountain spirit), nature, and community, and the challenges the ritual faces today regarding sustainability and heritage status.

5.1 The Symbolism of the Ox Sacrifice and Regional Specificity

The offering of a sacrificial ox during the Sanshinje of Yeonchuk-dong is an exceptionally rare practice in Korea and serves to distinguish the village's ritual identity from those of surrounding areas. As Residents proudly state, 'In this region, Yeonchuk-dong is the only place that still offers a bull,' thereby reinforcing their sense of communal pride. This descriptive account reveals how the ox operates symbolically as a metonym for the community's moral unity and sacrificial ethics, extending beyond its material function. thereby reinforcing their collective sense of pride and legitimacy as members of a culturally distinct community.

Historically, oxen have symbolized fertility and life force in ancient ritual traditions. Their sacrificial offering functions not merely as a provision of food, but as a symbolic act of public ethics—a part sacrificed for the whole. In Yeonchuk-dong, the ritual involves presenting key anatomical parts such as the head, liver, and legs. These offerings do more than complete the ritual form; they symbolically return the village's vital energies to the mountain spirit, framing the sacrifice as an act of communal renewal. In this sense, the ox operates as a metonymic symbol of community cohesion, anchoring Yeonchuk-dong's unique ritual identity within a broader cosmological and ethical framework.

5.2 Reconstructing the Relationship Between Divinity, Nature, and Community

The Sanshinje ritual reimagines the mountain not merely as a geographic backdrop, but as a sacred guardian and vigilant overseer of the community. As such, the ritual enacts a symbolic reconstruction of the relationship between humanity, nature, and the transcendent. The mountain constitutes a liminal space—simultaneously external to and internal to the village. Key ritual sites such as the sacred spring and the decaying pine tree are not only physical locations but also symbolic centers that structure the cosmology of the rite.

The timing of the ritual—conducted at midnight—disrupts ordinary temporal rhythms and ushers the community into a liminal state of transition. In Turnerian terms, this ritual moment constitutes a “structureless structure,” wherein villagers temporarily transcend their social hierarchies and coalesce into a unified collective. The Sanshinje, then, functions as a symbolic mechanism for negotiating and recalibrating the political and moral order of the community.

5.3 Ritual Continuity and Contemporary Challenges

The enduring vitality of the Sanshinje in Yeonchuk-dong is not simply the product of habitual repetition. Rather, it emerges from the organic interplay between grassroots participation and formalized institutional structures. Nevertheless, the ritual now faces a range of contemporary challenges. Chief

among these is the rising financial burden associated with purchasing a sacrificial ox—a matter serious enough to warrant deliberation at the annual general assembly of village residents.

Other pressures include the erosion of generational hierarchies, the spread of religious pluralism, and declining interest in tradition, all of which threaten the integrative and sacralizing functions of the ritual. These conditions highlight the urgent need for institutional measures that can safeguard the Sanshinje as a form of living heritage.

One proposed strategy is the designation of the ritual as an official cultural property, accompanied by a preservation model integrated with regional cultural tourism and education. However, such integration must preserve the ritual's internal logic and communal authorship. However, any such approach must prioritize the preservation of authenticity and community ownership. The Sanshinje is not a folkloric performance staged for spectators; it is a comprehensive moral and spiritual expression of the community itself. Preserving its intrinsic value must take precedence over its public display.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined how folk religious practices—specifically the Sanshinje of Yeonchuk-dong, Daedeok-gu, Daejeon—are enacted, transmitted, and imbued with cultural meaning and social function within a contemporary village community. Drawing upon the 2025 oral history publication, this research analyzed the voices and memories of ritual practitioners and adopted a combined folkloristic, symbolic-interpretive, and communitarian framework to understand the Sanshinje as a holistic cultural phenomenon.

The findings confirm that the Sanshinje functions not merely as a ceremonial event but as a central mechanism for sustaining the community's ethical order, belief system, and collective identity. The oral testimonies revealed that the ritual is widely perceived by villagers as a guarantor of communal peace and prosperity, and that this belief is reinforced and transmitted through the ritual's repeated performance, ultimately becoming embedded in collective memory. The selection of ritual officiants and the preparation processes serve as pedagogical mechanisms for internalizing communal norms and hierarchies. Furthermore, the institutionalization of the ritual through the Sanshinje Preservation Committee illustrates the community's capacity for self-organization and cultural governance.

The use of a sacrificial ox—an exceptionally rare practice in Korea—emerges as a powerful symbol of regional specificity in Yeonchuk-dong. It challenges prevailing typologies of Sanshinje, which generally exclude livestock offerings, and calls for a more fluid and inclusive classification of regional ritual forms. The offering of the ox, particularly its vital organs and extremities, functions as a metonymic representation of communal solidarity and moral unity. In parallel, the symbolic system of the Sanshin, sanjedang (mountain shrine), sacred spring, and ritual grounds manifests the organic interconnection among nature, divinity, and community order.

However, the Sanshinje also faces increasing challenges in the modern era. The rising economic burden of acquiring a sacrificial ox, the erosion of traditional village structures, the spread of religious pluralism, and the waning interest in inherited customs all pose threats to the sustainability and

integrity of the rite. These challenges necessitate new approaches that safeguard the ritual's intrinsic authenticity while developing institutional and policy frameworks that uphold community ownership. The Sanshinje must be supported not as a folkloric performance but as a living moral and spiritual system embedded in local practice.

Thus, the Sanshinje must not be preserved merely as an aesthetic display or folkloric performance, but must be supported as a living heritage under the cultural sovereignty of the community itself. This calls for a preservation strategy grounded in community authority, avoiding extractive heritage practices and instead fostering shared ownership of living tradition. This approach ensures the ritual's sustainability without compromising its authenticity or communal sovereignty. This calls for a preservation strategy grounded in community authority, avoiding extractive heritage practices and instead fostering shared ownership of living tradition.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the field of folklore research by analyzing the internal structure of folk belief through the lens of oral narrative and communal practice. It goes beyond text-based or structural analyses by foregrounding the lived experiences and testimonies of ritual agents, thereby expanding the methodological horizon of Korean folk religion studies.

Future research would benefit from comparative analyses across regions that perform similar Sanshinje rites. Such cross-regional inquiry could yield a typological classification of mountain spirit rituals and reveal the dynamics of symbolic transformation across different sociocultural contexts. Additionally, critical attention to intersecting themes—such as gender, generation, religious plurality, and cultural identity—would help illuminate how the Sanshinje is being recontextualized and renegotiated in the present. Through such inquiries, it will become possible to more precisely assess the cultural negotiations occurring at the intersection of tradition and modernity.

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