

Article

A Spatial Analysis of Shamans in South Korea's Religious Market

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Abstract

This study examined the spatial distribution of shamanic practice in contemporary South Korea, focusing on its territorial relationship with institutional religions. Contrary to portrayals of shamanism as a rural remnant or as absorbed by Pentecostal Christianity, population-adjust maps and spatial models reveal substantial concentrations in urban and peri-urban districts. Drawing on a geocoded dataset of 15,639 shamanic sites and 78,323 religious facilities across 229 districts, we estimated the ordinary least squares (OLS), spatial error models, and geographically weighted regression (GWR) models to evaluate how Protestant, Buddhist, and Catholic infrastructures were associated with shamanic site density. Protestant church density showed a consistent negative association with shamanic presence, strongest in regions with concentrated Protestant institutions. Buddhist temples had no uniform national effect but showed positive local associations in certain areas, suggesting localized symbiosis. Catholic sites displayed limited and inconsistent spatial relationships. These results demonstrate two contrasting dynamics: expulsion in Protestant strongholds and symbiosis, where Buddhist institutions allow more accommodation. Shamanism's contemporary geography reflects adaptation to the territorial politics of institutional religion rather than a cultural revival.

Keywords: Korean shamanism; religious economy; spatial analysis; Pentecostalism; religious competition



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1. Introduction

Shamanism has deep roots in Korean culture and remains popular among Koreans today. Shamanistic themes often appear in K-pop/dramas, media outlets, and online platforms, with shamanic sites easily seen in cities as fortune-telling parlors, Saju cafes, and ritual service signs. The Korean public continues to debate whether their modern presence reflects cultural resilience, commercialization, or a more significant shift in Korea's religious landscape (Lau 2025). While some scholars point to an underlying animistic cosmology that influences many spiritual practices in Korea, others focus on religious competition, especially how Christian churches have frequently opposed shamanic beliefs and practices (A. E. Kim 2005; S.-G. Kim 2006; K. Kim 2017). Scholars have debated whether Pentecostalism serves as a hostile challenge to or a strategic imitation of shamanism in Korea (Govorounova 2012).

However, few studies have examined how shamanism endures in relation to the spatial power of institutional religions. Most accounts overlook the material and regulatory

dimensions of survival, including legal recognition, zoning exclusion, and infrastructural access, all of which shape where vernacular religion can operate. This study addresses that gap.

To do so, we analyzed the persistence of shamanism not only as a cultural or symbolic phenomenon, but as a spatial practice shaped by constraints and opportunities in the urban religious landscape. Shamanic sites survive by adapting to regulatory ambiguity, infrastructural margins, and patterns of institutional dominance. This perspective frames shamanism as a spatially embedded vernacular religion operating under conditions of unequal access.

Despite widespread public and scholarly interest in Korean shamanism, quantitative data on shamans or shamanistic sites remain limited. Media outlets often cite unverified estimates, such as *The Economist*'s 2018 report, which quoted Paik Woon-san, former head of the Korean Shaman Association ([The Economist 2018](#)), claiming that there were about 150,000 shamans and 300,000 fortune-tellers in Korea. However, official figures from Statistics Korea reported only 9391 registered divination-related businesses employing 10,194 workers in 2022 ([Hankook Ilbo 2024](#)). Through extensive Internet searches with relevant keywords, we compiled a list of 15,639 shamanic sites that were publicly visible and active, the most comprehensive dataset of Korean shamans to date. This was also verified with several commercial directories and organizational lists. In this article, we present a spatial analysis of Korean shamanic sites and their relationships with Christian churches and Buddhist temples.

2. Korean Shamanism and Historical Transformations

2.1. Indigenous Beliefs and Ritual Specialists

Korean shamanism, often called Muism (무속, Musok, 巫俗), is an ancient indigenous tradition of the Korean Peninsula and remains one of the oldest and most resilient forms of Korean spirituality. At its heart, Muism believes in a world filled with numerous spirits (shin), including nature gods, ancestral souls, and guardian figures, who affect human well-being and misfortune. The key figure in this tradition is the mudang (무당, shaman), who serves as a bridge between humans and the spiritual realm. Through rituals called gut (굿)—which feature drumming, chanting, dancing, and spirit possession—shamans work to restore harmony, bring prosperity, heal sickness, or calm restless spirits. Although it lacks a centralized doctrine, Muism has been deeply woven into daily life and has persisted because of its ability to adapt and respond to local needs ([Kendall 1987](#); [Walraven 2009](#)).

Muism is not a single, uniform system but includes various forms shaped by region, lineage, and ritual style. A key distinction exists between hereditary shamans (세습무, sesŭp-mu) and initiatory shamans (강신무, kangshin-mu). Hereditary shamans, mainly found in the southern provinces, inherit their authority within shamanic families and often pass down ritual knowledge through generations. In contrast, initiatory shamans, prevalent in central and northern Korea, are called through a spiritual crisis known as shin-byeong (“spirit sickness”), which leads to possession and the acceptance of the shamanic role ([Lee 1981](#)). While northern and central traditions focus on possession trance, southern styles rely more on hereditary transmission, and Jeju Island features a unique pantheon and ritual cycle, mainly managed by female shamans (shimbang), who preserve rich oral mythologies ([Kendall 1987](#); [Walraven 1994](#)).

The history of Korean shamanism is characterized by alternating periods of suppression, marginalization, and revival. Before Japanese colonial rule in 1910, Muism thrived as a vital part of village and household life. Although dismissed by Confucian elites of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) as “superstition”, shamans continued to meet the spiritual and ritual needs of everyday people by performing rites for harvests, protection, healing, and

ancestral appeasement. This dual reality—stigma from above but vitality from below—shaped Muism’s status throughout the late premodern era (Walraven 2009).

2.2. Colonial Suppression and Urban Adaptation

During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), shamanism faced increased scrutiny and suppression. Colonial authorities officially labeled it as a “superstition” (*mishin*) that was incompatible with modernization and national progress, resulting in the destruction of shrines and the harassment of shamans. However, interestingly, Japanese and Korean ethnographers documented shamanic practices extensively during this time, leaving behind valuable records. Colonial urbanization also changed the landscape of Muism: shamans moved into growing cities, adapting their rituals to serve urban families dealing with illness, misfortune, and social upheaval (S.-G. Kim 2018; Lee 1981). Despite official suppression, shamanism persisted, often in marginalized and stigmatized forms.

2.3. Postwar Modernization and Cultural Reappraisal

In the post-colonial period since 1945, Muism experienced both revival and renewed contestation. After liberation in 1945 and the devastation of the Korean War, many turned to shamans for comfort and ritual mediation amid trauma and loss. However, South Korea’s rapid modernization in the 1960s and 1970s, along with government-led “anti-superstition” campaigns, again stigmatized shamanic practices as obstacles to national progress (Walraven 2009). Despite these pressures, shamans continued to serve clients in both rural and urban settings, often discreetly. From the 1980s onward, a cultural reevaluation began as anthropologists, folklorists, and cultural nationalists recognized shamanic rituals as key parts of Korean heritage. Several major gut rituals, such as the Jeju Yeongdeung-gut and the Seoul Jinogwi-gut, were designated as Intangible Cultural Properties, securing their preservation (Kendall 1987; S.-G. Kim 2018). In modern South Korea, Muism persists both as a living spiritual practice and as a symbol of cultural identity, simultaneously stigmatized as superstition and celebrated as tradition.

Urbanization has significantly transformed shamanism. The postwar economic boom and rapid urban migration not only reshaped residential and commercial areas, but also altered religious spaces. Many shamans moved into cities and adjusted their practices to fit new environments: office buildings, alleys, rooftops, and apartment interiors became part of their rituals (Kendall 2011; Sarfati 2018). Furthermore, instead of being preserved as rural relics, Muism has reappeared in commodified and privatized forms that address urban anxieties. Clients, often women facing unstable economic and relational situations, seek shamans for guidance, healing, or clarity. These practices are increasingly presented as “counseling”, with shamans positioning themselves as lifestyle guides rather than religious authorities, a strategic response to urban skepticism. Yoo (2017) details how shamans in Seoul operate within the limits of zoning laws, gentrification, and landlord relationships. His research shows that their ability to stay in a neighborhood often depends on informal negotiations rather than official religious rights. While Muism in traditional Korea displayed communal traits, S.-N. Kim (2005) argues that the rise in urban shamanism is part of a larger religious shift toward individual, therapeutic, and transactional spirituality. In this view, shamanic practice no longer relies on communal approval but instead persists by addressing privatized, client-focused spiritual needs.

This transition from communal to individualized practice raises a central question: how are such vernacular forms spatially sustained amid regulatory, architectural, and institutional constraints in modern cities? This adaptability continues a longer pattern in which Muism survives not by institutional recognition, but by repositioning itself within

shifting religious and spatial configurations, shaped by dominant regimes of regulatory and symbolic power (Lefebvre 1991; Asad 2003).

3. Expulsive and Symbiotic Relationships in the Religious Market

Prior studies have frequently linked Korean shamanism to marginalized populations such as the elderly, less-educated, female, or rural residents. On the other hand, recent studies have interpreted this association through romanticized narratives of cultural resilience or essentialized claims of indigenous authenticity. While these accounts highlight continuity and identity, they tend to obscure the structural and institutional conditions that enable shamanism's contemporary survival. Our study employed a critical spatial approach to examine how shamanic practices endure amidst religious competition and urban transformation, rather than valorizing them as cultural heritage.

This study argues that Korean shamanism is not merely a residual tradition but a spatial actor that negotiates access within a hierarchically structured religious field. Its persistence relies on informal adaptation to legal ambiguities, infrastructural gaps, and symbolic marginalization, all best understood through a spatial reinterpretation of religious economy theory.

3.1. Protestant Expulsion and Pentecostal Parallels

The relationships between shamanism and institutional religions of Buddhism and Christianity are intricate and complex. A. E. Kim (2005) notes that Protestantism, striving to present itself as both spiritually genuine and culturally contemporary, explicitly views shamanism as a backward barrier to national advancement. This discourse aligns with longstanding colonial-era and modernist state policies. Protestant hostility toward shamanism is especially intense among evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which regard shamanic practices as demonic or spiritually risky. Paradoxically, some Pentecostal rituals, including healing services, spiritual warfare, and prophetic prayer, share structural and performative features with shamanic ceremonies. S.-G. Kim (2018) argues that the rising popularity of Korean Pentecostalism partly stems from its ability to adopt emotional aspects of Muism including cathartic prayer, personalized intercession, and miracle-focused stories. However, he emphasizes that this adoption occurs within a strict theological framework that views shamanic spirits as adversaries that must be expelled. K. Kim (2017) similarly states that such ritual similarities are not examples of syncretism but a strategic redefinition of Korean religious expectations within a Protestant worldview—maintaining theological boundaries while accommodating cultural patterns. Govorounova (2012) showed that many Pentecostal pastors actively used anti-shamanic language in their sermons, even as their ritual practices esthetically and functionally resembled shamanic rituals. This paradox reveals a spatial dimension: Protestant expansion, enabled by zoning advantages and institutional visibility, often displaces shamanic sites. Protestant territoriality thus operates as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991) in which control over religious space defines what counts as legitimate spirituality. While such spatial displacement is evident, many Pentecostal rituals continue to mirror shamanic forms. Emotional intensity and ritual structure overlap, but Pentecostalism's explicit aim remains the elimination of shamanic beliefs rather than their accommodation (Rio et al. 2017). The appeal of Korean Pentecostalism comes from its alignment with a spirit-filled worldview that reflects many Koreans' cultural background including elements historically found in shamanic cosmology. A spatial analysis may clarify whether the relationship between shamanism and Christianity is expulsive or symbiotic.

3.2. Buddhist Accommodation and Syncretism

In contrast to Protestant hostility, Korean Buddhism has historically maintained a more ambivalent and often collaborative relationship with shamanism. Grayson (1984) and Hogarth (2002) trace this relationship to the systematic incorporation of indigenous deities such as mountain gods, dragon kings, and ancestral spirits into Buddhist temples and rituals. Recent ethnographic and historical scholarship provides extensive documentation of syncretism between Korean Buddhism and indigenous folk religion—a phenomenon known in Korean as *습합* (習合), which is especially evident in rural and coastal regions where Buddhist temples frequently house not only Buddhist images, but also shrines dedicated to indigenous deities such as mountain spirits (산신), the Seven Stars (칠성), and other folk gods, sometimes in adjacent halls within the same temple complex (Jang 2015). This accommodation, however, is not uniform. As our findings indicate, it often reflects localized coexistence or segmented pluralism, in which Buddhist temples and shamanic practices occupy the same space through differentiation rather than formal integration. Contemporary temple murals regularly feature both Buddhist and shamanic figures, and some shamanic shrines are even registered as Buddhist temples, with personnel sometimes holding dual credentials as monks and shamans.

3.3. Conceptual Framework: Religious Economy Theory

The religious landscape of contemporary South Korea can be fruitfully examined through the lens of religious economy theory, which conceptualizes religious life as a form of market exchange (Stark and Finke 2000). In this perspective, different religious actors compete for adherents, resources, and symbolic legitimacy in ways analogous to firms competing for consumers in an economic market.

Within this religious market, the relationships among shamanic sites, churches, and temples may be understood as taking two general forms. The first can be described as expulsive relationships, in which the growth or presence of one tradition actively displaces or marginalizes another. Expulsion may occur when new religious institutions compete directly for prime locations, forcing earlier occupants to relocate or close. It may also occur symbolically, as when the legitimacy of shamanic practices is undermined by the moral or theological critiques of institutional religions, thereby reducing the demand for shamanic services. In South Korea, for instance, the rapid proliferation of Protestant churches in urban districts has often had the effect of crowding out shamanic shrines, both by occupying scarce urban sites and by redirecting potential clients to church-centered spiritual services.

However, as Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005) argue, space is not a neutral backdrop but a product of social struggle. Access to religious space is shaped not only by market forces, but also by zoning, legal classification, and symbolic power. We extend religious economy theory by incorporating this spatial dimension, asking not only who competes, but also who controls visibility and permanence.

The second form can be described as symbiotic relationships, in which religious traditions can coexist in the same space without undermining one another, and in some cases, even reinforce each other's social presence. Such variation gives rise to what we conceptualize as regional religious regimes, which are geographically differentiated systems of exclusion, accommodation, or neutrality that structure the conditions under which vernacular practices such as shamanism survive.

Symbiosis occurs when different traditions appeal to distinct constituencies, address divergent spiritual or social needs, or provide services that are not seen as substitutes. In South Korea, shamanic practices and Buddhist temples often coexist in the same neighborhoods or rural districts, with shamans providing ritual mediation for individual crises. In contrast, temples offer communal religious and moral frameworks. In such contexts, the

presence of one does not negate the other; instead, both may thrive by occupying different niches within the broader religious market.

These expulsive and symbiotic relationships manifest themselves in distinct spatial patterns. Zones where churches have proliferated and shamanic shrines have disappeared exemplify expulsive dynamics, while districts where shrines and temples are found side by side illustrate symbiotic ones. By mapping these distributions, spatial analysis makes visible the uneven processes of competition and symbiosis that shape South Korea's religious landscape. The conceptual distinction between expulsive and symbiotic relationships thus provides a helpful framework for interpreting the spatial organization of religious life, highlighting not only the tensions that emerge in a crowded religious marketplace, but also the enduring pluralism that characterizes South Korea's religious landscape.

4. Data and Methods

Our data on shamanic sites were gathered through systematic keyword searches at the Dong [동], Eup [읍], or Myeon [면] level (or neighborhood) on Google Maps and Naver Maps. The keywords included: 신당 (Shamanism temple), 선녀 (Daoist fairy), 도령 (Young master), 도사 (Master), 굿 (Shamanic ritual), 무당 (Shaman), 운세 (Fortune), 사주 (Four pillars), 타로 (Tarot), 보살 (Bodhisattva), 역술가 (Diviner), 신점 (Divination), 만신 (Female shaman), 부적 (Talisman), 팔자 (Four pillars of destiny), 퇴마 (Exorcism), 동자 (Child deity), 궁합 (Marital compatibility), 박수무당 (Male shaman), 운명 (Destiny), and 역학 (Sorcery). The search results were first systematically checked by using the name and coordinates of each site or place and then, to address issues with language translation ambiguities and errors—such as the mistranslation of “굿” as “good” in English—these were manually checked and cross-referenced with a directory of divination and fortunetelling businesses ([Statistics Korea 2021](#)) and a registry of the Korean Shaman Association ([Korean Shaman Association n.d.](#)). This process produced a final sample of 15,639 shamanic sites.

We obtained data on churches and temples from the Contents Egg 2022 religious facility address directories ([Contents Egg 2022](#)) including 59,930 Protestant churches, 15,378 Buddhist temples, and 3015 Catholic churches. Street addresses were geocoded using Naver and Google Maps, with manual corrections applied when discrepancies appeared. Duplicate entries were identified by cross-checking coordinates, address details, and institution names to detect records referring to the same site despite formatting or spelling variations. Suspected duplicates were flagged and reviewed for consolidation or removal, ensuring accuracy in the dataset.

Our analysis was conducted at the district level of Korean administration (229 Gu 구, Gun 군, and Si 시). Religious sites and shamanic sites were aggregated to this level, with zero values assigned to districts where no sites were present. Site densities were normalized by population using the 2021 census from the Korean Statistical Information Service ([Statistics Korea 2021](#)).

The dependent variable was the density of shamanic practice sites (per 100,000 residents). Independent variables included the density of Protestant and Catholic churches and Buddhist temples as well as demographic and infrastructural controls: age structure (youth and senior shares), educational attainment (college or higher), number of businesses, and the proportion of apartments over 30 years old. Variables were normalized and log-transformed where necessary to reduce skewness and heteroscedasticity.

The analysis proceeded in four steps: (1) descriptive analysis of the main variables; (2) calculation of Global Moran's I to assess the spatial autocorrelation of shamanic site density and local indicators of spatial association (LISA) to identify clusters, which together justify the use of spatial econometric models; (3) estimation of global models beginning with ordinary least squares (OLS) as a baseline and followed by spatial lag models (SLMs)

and spatial error models (SEMs) to account for spatial dependence; and (4) implementation of geographically weighted regression (GWR) to examine local variation in the coefficients, allowing the associations to differ across regions.

5. Results

Table 1 presents the summary statistics for religion-related variables used in the study. As shown in the table, across the 229 districts, there are on average 66 shaman sites, 67 Buddhist temples, 13 Catholic churches, and 261 Protestant churches. Apparently, Protestant churches are the most common religious sites in Korea, outnumbering those of all other major religions combined. Catholicism, by comparison, has a much smaller physical presence. Although shamanic sites are almost as numerous as Buddhist temples, they are generally smaller and likely less influential. The distribution of all of these religious sites also varies significantly from one district to another.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for religion-related variables at the Gu (district), Gun (county), and Si (city) level (N = 229).

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
No. of Shamanic practice sites	66.201	73.352	0	444
No. of Buddhist sites	66.764	50.549	6	334
No. of Catholic sites	13.131	9.274	2	59
No. of Protestant sites	260.782	221.524	24	1304
Standardized variables				
No. of Shamanic practice sites per 100k pop	27.529	20.648	0	167.375
No. of Buddhist sites per 100k pop	68.316	71.309	3.138	468.901
No. of Catholic sites per 100k pop	12.231	14.337	1.500	150.117
No. of Protestant sites per 100k pop	174.067	100.476	31.753	638.109

5.1. Spatial Autocorrelation and Clustering Analysis

Figure 1 displays the spatial distribution of shamanic practice sites across the 229 districts in South Korea. Several patterns are immediately visible. While Seoul and Busan show high absolute counts of sites, after adjusting for population (see the figure on the right), their per capita densities were surpassed by mid-sized cities and peri-urban areas such as Jeonju (North Jeolla), Gunsan, Cheonan (South Chungcheong), and Mokpo (South Jeolla). This challenges the conventional understanding that shamanism is a rural remnant and suggests its adaptive growth in a wide variety of contexts including secondary urban centers.

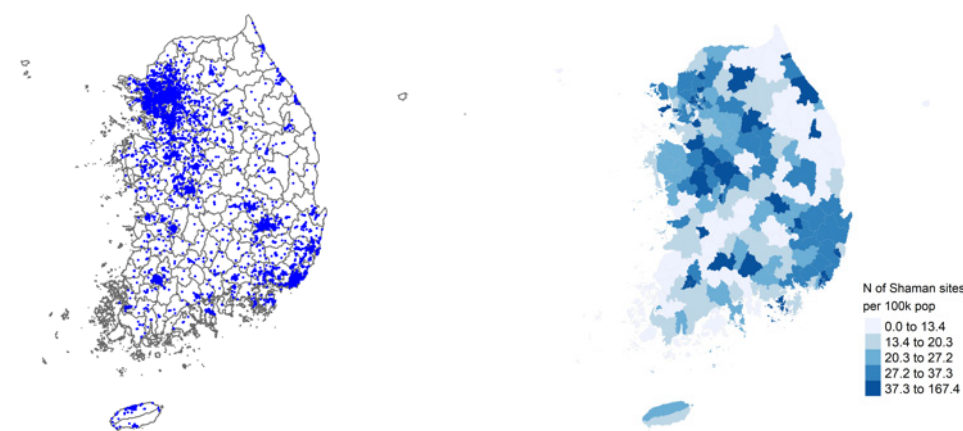


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of shamanic practice sites across districts. (Left) shamanic sites; (Right) density of shamanic sites, where darker blue shades represent districts with higher numbers of sites per 100,000 residents.

Figure 2 presents the results of the local indicators of spatial association (LISA) analysis, identifying statistically significant clusters—or “hot spots” and “cold spots”—of shamanic density across South Korea. The Moran’s I test ($I = 0.236$, $p < 0.001$) confirmed significant positive spatial autocorrelation, indicating that districts with high shamanic site density tend to be located near others with similarly high density. In other words, these sites tend to cluster together rather than being randomly spread out. Hot spots of shamanic clustering appeared predominantly in urban and peri-urban districts such as Mokpo, Suncheon, and Jeonju—regions characterized by lower Protestant density, and in some cases, a stronger Buddhist or religiously pluralistic presence.

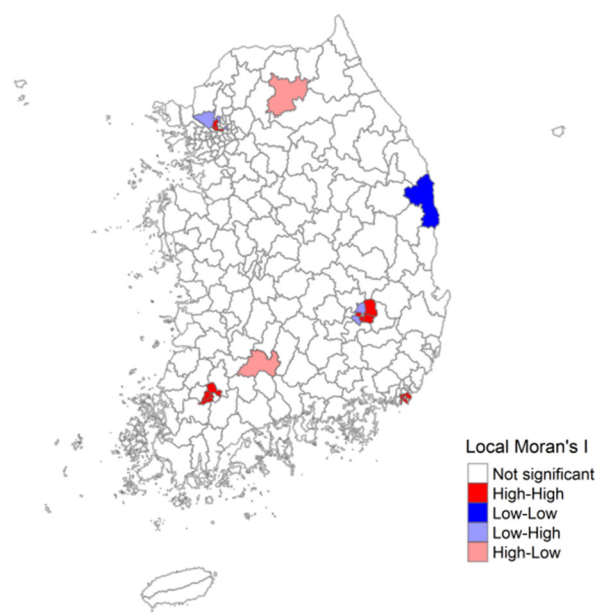


Figure 2. Spatial clustering of shamanic practice sites at the Gu^ㄱ (district), Gun^군 (county), and Si^시 (city) levels (global Moran’s I: 0.236, $p < 0.001$).

On the other hand, “cold spots”, where shamanic sites are rare, can be found in North Gyeongsang, Gangwon, and parts of southern Gyeonggi-do. These areas tend to have a more modern urban infrastructure and a higher density of Protestant institutions. Clearly, these patterns suggest that religious institutions and local conditions play an important role in shaping where shamanic practices can continue or decline.

A comparative analysis of select metropolitan and regional cases offers further evidence that Korean shamanism is not confined to rural margins but remains active in a variety of urban and semi-urban environments. These examples show that shamanic clustering is not a residual pattern left behind by modernization, but a result of how religious institutions and urban conditions shape the spaces where such practices can continue.

In Seoul, the shamanic site density is relatively high but spatially uneven, with notable concentrations in neighborhoods like Jongno, Gangbuk, and Mapo. These areas are characterized by older buildings, mixed-use zoning, and long-standing cultural functions. Even within the country’s most modernized city, these zones provide room for shamanic practice, often through informal arrangements or older housing stock that resists redevelopment. This case challenges the assumption that urban modernity automatically displaces shamanic traditions. In contrast, South Jeolla Province shows a more continuous and concentrated pattern. Shamanic sites are clustered across both urban and rural districts, especially around Mokpo and Suncheon. These are not isolated villages but regional cities with active economies and institutional life. Notably, this area has a relatively low Protestant presence and a stronger Buddhist infrastructure. This religious environment appears

to provide more room for coexistence, suggesting that shamanic clustering here is shaped less by geography and more by the degree of institutional tolerance.

Daejeon presents a contrasting case. Despite being a centrally located city with significant size and infrastructure, it lacks any strong spatial clustering of shamanic sites. The distribution is scattered, which may reflect more recent patterns of urban growth, less historical layering, or planning structures that limit the concentration of informal religious activity. This suggests that neither urban scale nor population alone explains clustering; it is the interplay of religious presence, historical development, and zoning that shapes where shamanism can take hold.

Overall, these cases reinforce that Korean shamanism is not a rural leftover but a tradition that has adapted to urban realities. Shamanic sites continue to appear in cities large and small, particularly in areas where Protestant influence is limited and urban structures allow for informal or hybrid religious spaces. These patterns challenge the notion that shamanism belongs to a disappearing past, and instead show how it is responding to the competitive and spatial dynamics of the present.

5.2. Institutional Religious Competition

The spatial regression models presented in Table 2 help clarify the relationship between Protestant institutional presence and the distribution of shamanic sites. While the ordinary least squares (OLS) model serves as a statistical baseline, it does not account for spatial dependence and is included primarily for comparison. The spatial error and spatial lag models provide more appropriate estimates for this context. In both models, districts with higher densities of Protestant churches tend to have fewer shamanic sites. For example, in the spatial error model, the coefficient for Protestant density was -0.083 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a consistent inverse relationship. This pattern suggests that Protestant infrastructure may limit the areas where shamanic practices can take root or remain visible.

Table 2. OLS and spatial error/lag models for shamanic practice sites.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Variables	OLS	Spatial Error	Spatial Lag
No. of Buddhist sites per 100k pop	0.012 (0.025)	0.025 (0.026)	0.015 (0.025)
No. of Catholic sites per 100k pop	0.090 (0.112)	0.061 (0.112)	0.073 (0.109)
No. of Protestant sites per 100k pop	-0.090^{***} (0.022)	-0.083^{***} (0.023)	-0.076^{***} (0.022)
% with college degree	-0.167 (0.304)	0.010 (0.325)	-0.174 (0.297)
No. of businesses (log)	7.706 *** (2.249)	8.664 *** (2.244)	7.875 *** (2.181)
% apartments 30+ years old	0.195 ** (0.067)	0.200 ** (0.066)	0.185 ** (0.065)
% people aged 20–29	2.022 ** (0.635)	1.588 * (0.624)	1.800 ** (0.616)
% people aged 65+	1.149 *** (0.326)	1.104 *** (0.334)	1.073 *** (0.316)
Constant	-81.187^{**} (25.681)	-89.379^{***} (25.526)	-85.701^{***} (24.857)
Observations	229	229	229
R ²	0.296		
AIC	1979.115	1974.432	1976.889

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In contrast, Buddhist and Catholic site densities showed weak positive associations with shamanic site density, but these effects were not statistically significant in any of the models ($p > 0.1$). These results may reflect low levels of direct institutional competition between these traditions and shamanism, or they may point to variation across regions that is not captured by global models. As later sections show, localized relationships vary considerably.

Several indicators also appear to shape the distribution of shamanic sites. The number of businesses, log-transformed, was positively associated with shamanic site density across all models ($\beta \approx 7.7$ to 8.7 , $p < 0.001$), indicating that shamanic services are more common in economically active areas. The proportion of housing stock over 30 years old also showed a positive relationship ($\beta \approx 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), which supports the idea that older residential infrastructure may create space—both physically and in regulatory terms—for informal or alternative spiritual services (Yoo 2017; Kendall 2011). Finally, age structure variables—specifically the proportions of residents aged 20–29 and over 65—were statistically significant in the models. However, these coefficients are interpreted as demographic controls rather than as evidence of generational interest in shamanism, and their associations may reflect broader patterns of housing, migration, or population composition. Without individual-level data, no conclusions can be drawn about age and religious preference (A. E. Kim 2005; Sarfati 2018).

5.3. Spatial Variation and Local Dynamics

The geographically weighted regression (GWR) model (see Table 3) allows the relationships between shamanic site density and other religious or social variables to vary across space, providing a way to examine local as well as global dynamics. While the global models captured the overall associations, the GWR results show that these relationships are not uniform across the country. In terms of model performance, the GWR provided better fit ($AICc = 1923.472$) and explanatory power (pseudo- $R^2 = 0.43$), confirming that spatial heterogeneity is an important part of the religious landscape.

Table 3. Summary statistics for the GWR results (coefficients) at the local level.

Variable	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max
No. of Buddhist sites per 100k pop	0.095	0.130	0.040	−0.005	0.537
No. of Catholic sites per 100k pop	0.335	0.397	0.197	−0.210	1.138
No. of Protestant sites per 100k pop	−0.082	0.022	−0.078	−0.150	−0.042
% with college degree	0.375	1.045	−0.136	−0.752	2.192
No. of businesses (log)	6.092	3.687	6.158	0.036	11.662
% apartments 30+ years old	0.226	0.214	0.212	−0.090	0.646
% people aged 20–29	2.486	0.744	2.495	0.744	3.958
% people aged 65+	0.982	0.286	0.935	0.319	1.799
Intercept	−83.664	15.996	−78.306	−129.292	−60.189
Quasi-global R^2			0.559		
AIC			1982.004		
AICc			1923.472		

Note: The global results were very similar to the OLS results and thus not shown.

As Table 3 and Figure 3 illustrate, the negative association between Protestant church density and shamanic sites was strongest in areas such as southern Gyeonggi-do, Daegu, and Ulsan, regions historically shaped by Protestant dominance and evangelical activism. At the same time, the effect was weaker or absent in the northwest, indicating that Protestantism does not uniformly displace shamanism across the country. In contrast, Buddhist temple density showed positive associations with shamanic sites in parts of South Jeolla, eastern Gangwon, and some southern coastal districts, suggesting a pattern of accommodation or non-antagonistic coexistence in historically Buddhist regions. Catholic site density

showed relatively little consistent spatial effect, though positive associations appeared in select areas.

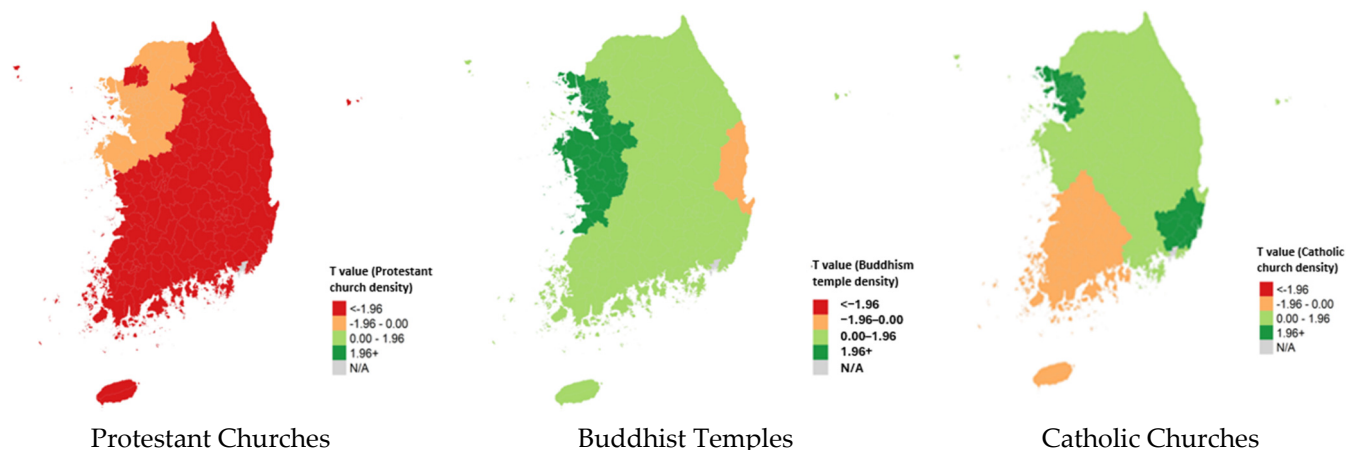


Figure 3. GWR results for the density of Protestant, Buddhist, and Catholic sites (left to right).

Together, these results show that the spatial dynamics of shamanic practice cannot be captured by national averages alone. Protestant institutions impose strong territorial constraints in their core strongholds, but the effect is weaker or absent in other regions. Buddhist temples are positively associated with shamanic sites in parts of South Jeolla, eastern Gangwon, and coastal areas, suggesting localized accommodation. Catholic churches display limited and inconsistent spatial impact. These variations confirm that religious competition and symbiosis are shaped by local conditions rather than by uniform national trends.

6. Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that Korean shamanism endures not as a remnant of the past, but as a spatially adaptive and ritually resilient religious formation. As shown in the hot spot and LISA analyses, shamanic sites clustered most densely in infrastructural margins, urban edges, and peri-urban zones, suggesting a strategic reterritorialization of vernacular religious practice. This spatial behavior reflects continuous negotiation with the infrastructural constraints and symbolic hierarchies that shape Korea's religious environment. Earlier literature has often described shamanism as cultural residue or as a site of ethno-national revival, but our analysis indicates that shamanism functions as an active religious actor operating within spatial asymmetries and informally embedded environments.

Building on religious economy theory, which conceptualizes religious life as competition within an open market, our results reveal that the Korean religious field is not a level marketplace but a spatially structured arena of unequal access. Shamanism survives not through institutional parity, but by positioning itself in marginal yet accessible spaces. It navigates infrastructural gaps, older housing zones, and commercial corridors where institutional religions have not fully saturated. These patterns show that shamanic persistence depends on informal legitimacy, mobility, and trust networks rather than on legal recognition or architectural visibility. The association between shamanic sites and older housing stock supports ethnographic findings that survival often relies on the adaptive use of properties outside formal religious zoning.

This territorial logic is most evident in Protestant-dominated regions such as southern Gyeonggi, Daegu, and Ulsan, where the spatial exclusion of shamanic sites coincides with dense concentrations of Protestant churches. These are not zones of declining religious-

ity but of monopolized religious space. Protestantism's success in these areas represents not only numerical growth, but also the reorganization of urban space according to modernist ideals of order, visibility, and moral purification (Weber 2001; Yoo 2017). As Weber's notion of rationalization suggests, Protestantism transformed the religious landscape by aligning faith with the rationalized structures of bureaucracy, zoning, and modern architecture (Weber 2001; Casanova 1994). Churches function as both religious and civic landmarks, their permanence signaling institutional legitimacy. In contrast, shamanic practices, lacking formal recognition, are forced into temporary or concealed locations. The resulting geography of exclusion illustrates how modernization and Protestant ethics converged in Korea to define which forms of spirituality could occupy public spaces (A. E. Kim 2005; S.-G. Kim 2018).

These territorial patterns call for a reconsideration of religious economy theory. Classical market models assume equal access to participation, but our findings demonstrate that spatial power and legal frameworks determine who can compete at all. As Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005) have argued, space is not a neutral container, but a social product shaped by law, capital, and ideology. Protestant institutions benefit from spatial legitimacy granted by legal registration, while shamanic sites remain informally tolerated and periodically displaced. What appears as religious preference is therefore deeply entangled with structural inequality in access to land and visibility. Religious competition in Korea must be understood as both market and territorial struggle, where control of space itself becomes a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991; Stark and Finke 2000).

In contrast to Protestant regions of exclusion, our spatial models identified localized zones of shamanic and Buddhist co-presence, particularly in Gangwon-do, Jeolla-do, and the eastern coastal areas. These clusters reveal a different institutional logic in which Buddhist presence allows the partial accommodation of vernacular practices. This coexistence operates through what may be called segmented pluralism, a pattern of religious coexistence based on spatial and functional differentiation rather than mutual recognition. Ethnographic studies show that many households employ both Buddhist monks and shamans but assign them distinct ritual domains: monks preside over memorial services while shamans address misfortune or crisis (Kendall 1987; Jang 2015). Temples retain visible authority and formal registration, while shamanic practice remains domestic, portable, and informal. Such pluralism emerges not from deliberate interfaith harmony but from historical pragmatism rooted in Korea's layered religious heritage (Grayson 1984; Hogarth 2002).

These regional contrasts, including Protestant exclusion in the metropolitan south, Buddhist accommodation in the southwest, and Catholic neutrality in other areas, provide the empirical basis for what may be termed regional religious regimes. Each regime represents a distinct configuration of institutional power, spatial control, and ritual legitimacy. The concept of a regional religious regime has broader theoretical implications beyond the Korean case. Similar to Foucault's idea of governmentality or Ong's concept of spatial regime, it describes how religious institutions organize and manage space to define legitimate forms of belief (Foucault 1991; Ong 2006). In Korea, Protestantism produces a regulatory regime of exclusion, Buddhism generates one of pragmatic tolerance, and Catholicism represents minimal spatial governance. These patterns reveal that religious modernity is not monolithic but regionally plural, producing distinct moral geographies within the same national context (Walraven 2009; Kendall 2011).

Such variation complicates secularization theory's assumption that modernization inevitably leads to religious privatization or decline. Drawing on Casanova's (1994) account of public religion and Taylor's (2007) analysis of the post-secular condition, we reinterpret these findings as evidence that modernization produces differentiated, rather than dimin-

ished, religious presence. Korean modernization has not secularized religion uniformly but has redistributed it across differentiated spaces. Protestant modernity pursued expansion through institutional visibility, while Buddhist modernity retained permeability to vernacular forms. Shamanism, rather than disappearing, has adjusted to these shifting terrains, illustrating what [Asad \(2003\)](#) described as the secular project's regulatory power: the state defines what counts as religion and what remains superstition. Shamanism's endurance at the edge of legality thus represents not resistance to modernity but adaptation within its spatial and bureaucratic order ([Asad 2003](#); [Yang 2006](#)).

Viewed comparatively, this pattern contrasts with both European secularization and the Chinese case of religious markets ([Yang 2006](#); [Casanova 2011](#)). Whereas European secularization marginalized institutional religion through privatization, and the Chinese state manages religion through compartmentalized legality ([Yang 2006](#)), Korea demonstrates a hybrid pattern of market liberalization constrained by spatial governance. The result is a post-secular urban landscape in which religion does not vanish but becomes unevenly distributed. This unevenness reveals that secularization cannot be understood simply as a temporal process of decline, but as a spatial process of reorganization and regulation.

Grounded in these empirical findings, Korean shamanism can be understood as a spatial actor that negotiates, adapts, and redefines the material and symbolic geography of religion. To conceptualize this agency, we draw from [de Certeau's \(1984\)](#) distinction between strategies and tactics. Institutional religions employ strategies rooted in long-term control, zoning, and architectural dominance. Shamans employ tactics, improvising presence through flexible tenancy, proximity to clients, and adaptation to changing urban structures. Their practice represents the everyday creativity through which marginalized actors sustain spiritual economies within dominant regimes. This resonates with Orsi's concept of lived religion, where believers inhabit and transform the structures that constrain them ([Orsi 2005](#); [Ammerman 2013](#)).

A recurring concern in both field observation and our dataset is the ambiguity of what counts as shamanic. The lack of formal regulation creates a continuum from ritual specialists to commercial diviners. This ambiguity, rather than a methodological flaw, reveals how vernacular religion operates under late modern conditions. The clustering of shamanic sites in commercial corridors and transit hubs suggests a mode of economic embeddedness that blends religious authority with market viability. What appears as commodification may be understood as a strategic adaptation to neoliberal urban economies ([Sarfaty 2018](#)). Shamans maintain ritual credibility through traditional symbols while functioning as service providers responding to individual needs. Clients, often women facing precarity, seek both spiritual and emotional care, and many shamans now frame their practice as counseling rather than formal religion.

Drawing on the observed clustering in commercial corridors, we propose a continuum framework in which shamanic sites occupy varying positions between ritual specialization and commercial spirituality, with most representing hybrid forms. This continuum expresses not the decline of authenticity but the creativity of adaptation. It also extends the theoretical scope beyond Korea by illustrating how, in late capitalist societies, religion and economy intertwine through shared logics of service, affect, and exchange. The persistence of shamanism challenges both secularization theory, which associates commercialization with decline, and classical religious economy theory, which views marketization as advantageous only for institutional religions. Vernacular practices demonstrate that survival depends on strategic ambiguity: the capacity to inhabit multiple systems of legitimacy at once.

These dynamics ultimately raise the question of who defines religion and how power operates through classification. Protestant churches, supported by law and zoning, enjoy

institutional status, while shamans, excluded from such frameworks, are rendered ambiguous not by their practice but by their position within regimes of regulation and recognition. In this sense, commodification becomes both an adaptive tactic and a sign of structural inequality. By situating these findings within the linked frameworks of religious economy, spatial production, and post-secular theory, this study shows that Korean shamanism is not a passive residue but an active spatial agent (Stark and Finke 2000; Lefebvre 1991; Taylor 2007; Orsi 2005). It redefines what counts as religious legitimacy in a modern society where institutional power, economic rationality, and vernacular creativity intersect. Shamanism survives not despite modernization but through continuous negotiation with it, creating new configurations of sacred presence in the margins of the modern city.

7. Conclusions

A critical paradox emerges from this spatial analysis. Shamanism survives through regulatory invisibility and operational informality, but this same invisibility leaves practitioners defenseless against displacement and political manipulation while also sustaining a measure of cultural resilience that enables continued adaptation within restrictive institutional conditions. Recent controversies involving claims of shamanic influence in South Korean politics exemplify this vulnerability. When political elites instrumentalize shamanic authority for legitimation, they may heighten public visibility while risking the erosion of autonomy, credibility, and control over religious meaning.

These dynamics raise fundamental questions about shamanic authority and survival under contemporary conditions. As Kendall (1987) and Walraven (2009) documented, shamanic authority has historically depended on recognized lineages, community validation, and ritual expertise. However, contemporary shamans operate in legal ambiguity without formal institutional recognition or credentialing systems. Under these conditions, does the intergenerational transmission of shamanic knowledge and authority remain viable, or does the shift to commercialized, individualized practice signal a significant departure from earlier lineage-based systems? Moreover, do shamans themselves perceive their spatial marginality as a tactical advantage enabling autonomy, or as structural oppression limiting their capacity to define and sustain their own religious traditions? These questions cannot be answered through spatial analysis alone. Longitudinal ethnographic research is necessary to understand how younger practitioners navigate the tension between acquiring traditional knowledge through informal domestic networks and establishing credibility in commercialized markets where shamanism increasingly competes as a service commodity.

The broader implications extend to religious governance in pluralistic societies. South Korea's religious landscape is not uniformly secularizing but rather stratified by institutional capacity and regulatory approach. Protestant expansion generates territorial exclusion, Buddhist institutions permit informal coexistence, and Catholicism exercises minimal spatial governance. This variation raises important normative questions: If shamanism persists only through strategic ambiguity and informality, does this constitute a viable form of religious pluralism, or does it reflect structural discrimination? State policies face inherent tensions. Formalizing shamanism through licensing or registration might enhance legal protection and tax security, but risks potentially drawing it into state frameworks that prescribe or delimit what counts as legitimate religious practice. Conversely, maintaining informal tolerance permits autonomy but leaves practitioners vulnerable to displacement due to urban redevelopment, zoning shifts, or shifting public sentiment. These tensions have relevance far beyond Korea, as many societies struggle to balance the protection of minority religious practices against the regulation of unregistered practitioners, informal healing, and vernacular spirituality (Yang 2006; Asad 2003).

The spatial patterns documented in this study represent shamanic practice at a particular historical moment. Shamanism has shifted from rural, communal contexts to urbanized, individualized, and commercialized forms, with current sites concentrated in older housing stock and commercial corridors. This distribution depends on specific urban conditions that are subject to change. As Korean cities undergo densification, zoning regulations tighten, and digital platforms expand, the material and institutional conditions enabling shamanic practice in these locations may be altered. Whether shamanic practice will formalize through registration systems, shift to digital platforms, disappear as practitioners age, or take other forms remains an open-question that cannot be answered by spatial analysis alone.

This study demonstrates that understanding Korean shamanism requires sustained attention to how space, regulation, and institutional power intersect in shaping religious life. Shamanism is neither a cultural relic nor an autonomous tradition, but a spatially contingent practice constrained by legal frameworks, urban development, and institutional competition. Its endurance depends on the practitioners' tactical mobility and their capacity to maintain credibility and community under conditions of marginality. The challenge for future scholarship is to examine how these spatial and regulatory constraints enable or foreclose the agency of shamanic practitioners in defining and sustaining their own religious futures. By reframing shamanism as a spatial actor, this study demonstrates that religious survival in modern Korea depends not on resistance to modernization, but on continual negotiation with its spatial and institutional structures.

8. Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the analysis was based on cross-sectional data, which capture only a single point in time. Shamanic practices respond to regulation, development, and religious competition, but without longitudinal evidence, it is impossible to see how patterns of expulsion or symbiosis have developed, intensified, or declined over time. Second, the dataset relies on publicly visible sources such as digital maps and business directories. This favors shamans who advertise openly or operate commercially, while undercounting those who practice privately, within households, or discreetly in conservative settings. As a result, the geography presented here may overstate shamanism's presence in metropolitan areas while obscuring less visible practices elsewhere. Third, the study measured sites, not participation or belief. Site density is useful for identifying the territorial pressures and accommodations created by other religious institutions, but it does not reveal the intensity of ritual practice, the makeup of clients, or the meaning of shamanism in everyday life. The move of shamanic activity onto digital platforms, including social media consultations, shows that geographic presence alone is not a reliable measure of religious influence. Fourth, the use of districts as the unit of analysis allows for national comparison but smooths over variation at the neighborhood or block level. The territorial logics identified here, such as Protestant expulsion and Buddhist symbiosis, are clear at the district scale, but more localized encounters of conflict, negotiation, or quiet coexistence remain invisible at this resolution. Future research using finer spatial units could address these dynamics more directly. Finally, demographic variables such as age and education were included only as controls. They improved the models by adjusting for background variation but do not explain the geography of shamanism and cannot support causal claims about generational or class-based affinities. Understanding how different groups engage with shamanism requires survey-based or ethnographic approaches that move beyond the ecological scale of this study.

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primarily to the data analysis and methodological refinement. F.Y. (third author) provided overall project supervision, conceptual guidance, and critical review of the manuscript. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final version of the paper. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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