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The Sacred Revolution: Propaganda and Personality Cult in North Korea

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Abstract

Thirty years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and while most former and current communist states have integrated themselves into the global economy, North Korea is still largely, and fiercely, resistant to it. It is one of the poorest countries in the world and also one of the most repressive regimes in contemporary times. Typically, widespread destitution and oppression inspire liberal reforms or democratic revolutions, but neither have happened in North Korea. This raises the question of how the regime has maintained internal control so effectively for so long. One explanation for its survival is the pervasive security apparatus, but mass surveillance and state-sanctioned violence cannot be the exclusive explanations. One of the key ways cultures maintain stability without coercion is religion, which can be defined as a belief system adhered to by a community and supported through behaviors that result in a desired psychological state. This article argues that the ruling-Kim dynasty's personality cult functions as a state religion that regulates the daily lives of North Koreans and contributes to the regime's survival. By primarily using Émile Durkheim's religious framework and Clifford Geertz's thick description, I will examine propaganda works, social institutions, and defector testimonies to understand and explain the efficacy of the myths and rituals of the state.

Keywords: North Korea, communism, nationalism, religion, culture, Cold War, Asia, socialism

Introduction

Thirty years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and while current and former communist states have integrated themselves into the global financial order, North Korea remains largely, and fiercely, resistant to it. Why have liberal reforms or a democratic revolution not taken place, despite the widespread repression and destitution? How has the state existed for so long, against incredible odds? One explanation for the regime's longevity is its security apparatus, which elicits conformity and obedience from the populace through surveillance, intimidation, and coercion. As the historian Charles Armstrong has pointed out, however, “coercive methods can only go so far before they create hostile reactions,” forcing the North Korean regime to “rely on moral exhortation to mobilize the masses.”¹ This “moral exhortation” is primarily accomplished through the dissemination of propaganda, or deliberately manipulated information based on selected facts, assumptions, and falsehoods, designed not to pursue objectivity, but to persuade an audience of a particular worldview or narrative. As Armstrong has suggested, when analyzing the nature of state power in any given regime, it is necessary to consider how customs influence the thoughts and actions of people in a society, and maintain the political status quo without violence. What, then, is the North Korean state ideology that the nation’s people are inculcated in? How are its tenants transmitted to the citizens? To what extent has the ideology’s propaganda secured the political establishment of the country, for the past 73 years?

South Korean political scientist Jae-cheon Lim proposes that the personality cult of North Korea – the true ideology of the state as a oppose to communism – can be interpreted as a religion because of the quality of its leadership, beliefs, and practices. He invokes the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who defined religion as a system of intensely held beliefs that are protected and adhered to by a community through rituals. Lim also builds on the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who defined religion as a network of symbols that presents a lifestyle and interpretation of reality in such an authoritative and persuasive manner, that the believer accepts the symbolic representations as true unto themselves.

The religious framework that Lim proposes is helpful in understanding the nature of the North Korean ideology, which from here on I will call a state religion, and the longevity of its regime. It demands a level of intensity well beyond a normal political ideology and evokes a degree of emotional investment that is unrivaled by other authoritarian or totalitarian cults. More significantly, the state religion of North Korea is predicated on a grand, teleological narrative that resembles the world’s religious and mythological stories. This narrative — what I call “The Sacred Revolution” — is a map of meaning for North Koreans. It is a story that prescribes for the individual an ethical model for how to act in the world, as well as a sense of purpose or direction in life towards an idealized destination. That purpose is loyalty to the state, to the Kim family and their holy war against South Korea and the United States.

According to Karen Armstrong, modern novels, operas, ballet, and other works of art are the spiritual successors of myth and religion from antiquity. They deal with the same questions about existence, draw from the same source material, profoundly elevate our lives, and offer

¹ Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 170.

guidance for them. Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il were, in the words of Lim, both “aware that art and literature were powerful instruments in educating people through a dramatic recreation of reality and emotional evocation.”² Thus, recognizing the power of faith – the need to believe and the need to belong – and the power of art and emotive storytelling, the North Korean regime harnessed the country’s talent and creativity to construct an indigenous value system that would permanently propagate party policy, the dictators’ doctrines, and mobilize the masses into political action.

1. Myths

Virtually every religion contains a narrative around its central figure, whose life serves as a model for its followers to emulate, or who propagated a dogma that was meant to be believed and practiced. In the North Korean state religion, the metanarrative is called “the revolution,” and its main character is Kim Il Sung, the founding father of the country who ruled it for almost half a century. Kim entered the world at a time of great national sorrow and humiliation, when Korea was occupied by Japan from 1910 to 1945. His mother was a devout Presbyterian and his father was a member of an underground Christian nationalist organization. In 1919, the Kim family moved to Manchuria (present-day northeast China) in search of better economic opportunity and greater political autonomy. Kim Il Sung returned to Korea briefly in 1923 for middle school, but would return to Manchuria two years later. On his way back to China, he allegedly experienced a damascene moment. According to the official history, after witnessing the oppression of his people throughout his country, Kim began to devote himself to national liberation, vowing to never return to Korea until she was free. While attending high school in Manchuria, Kim converted to communism and joined several underground Marxist organizations, even apparently creating his own called the Down-With-Imperialism Union. After the Japanese invaded Manchuria 1932, Kim allegedly founded a guerilla army composed of mostly Korean partisans in Manchuria (officially known as the Korean People’s Army) to push back the invasion. By traveling on foot and conducting hit-and-run tactics, the Korean communists — after enduring years of hunger, defection, bitter winters — supposedly liberated Korea from Japanese fascism in August 1945 under the wise leadership of the General.

The existing historical evidence, however, does not paint such a rosy picture. Like other national mythologies or hagiographies, Kim Il Sung’s revolution is a constructed historical narrative based on selected facts, distortions, and fabrications, but to a much more extreme extent. The communist leader did not create an independent guerilla army but was simply a member of one created by the Chinese Communist Party in 1931. Nor of course is Kim Il Sung solely or even remotely responsible for Japan’s defeat in World War II. The propaganda apparatus’ contempt for facts may seem rather incredible, but we must bear in mind that their goal is not to create a positivist chronology, but a compelling, dramatic story about the Kim that makes strong appeals to pathos and sacrifices factual accuracy.

As a result of the propaganda apparatus’s myth-making, Kim Il Sung functions as more than just a national hero to North Koreans, but as a messianic figure who brought salvation and

² Jae-Cheon Lim, *Kim Jong-il’s Leadership of North Korea* (New York, Routledge, 2009), 77.

redemption to his people and the holy motherland. Like a religious narrative, his myth is passed down from generation to generation in homes and classrooms as an incontrovertible dogma, with no tolerance for doubt, dissent, nuance, or competing narratives. The words and actions of Kim Il Sung and his guerilla comrades serve as models for the rest of society to emulate in all aspects of life, from studying, musical performance, to construction.

Not only does Kim Il Sung's myth function like a religious narrative, it is even structured like one. According to Jae Cheon Lim, Kim Il Sung's official biography "appears consistent with Joseph Campbell's development cycle of the hero myth."³ An eminent scholar of mythology, Campbell theorized that underlying the particularities of humanity's most sacred stories is a universal narrative structure that resonates with the desires and moral intuitions of many people across time and cultures. In Campbell's analysis, religious or mythological narratives contain a hero – usually a male protagonist – who is first separated from his home, either of his own volition or against his will. This phase, known as the "Departure," can be compared to Kim Il Sung's call to adventure for Manchuria in Korea. After his separation, the hero is forced to endure a series of trials that test his resolve and strength; tempted at times to deviate from his destiny, but guided towards his goal other times. This phase, known as the "Initiation," can be compared to Kim Il Sung's entry into guerilla life. After enduring many difficulties, the hero's journey culminates in a final battle that leads to the attainment of his goal. Kim and his comrades achieve their ultimate boon of liberating Korea before reaching the final phase of the hero arch: the "Return."

The Sacred Revolution, however, does not end with the conclusion of Japanese rule. Following the former colonizer's defeat in World War II, the Soviet Union and United States helped establish separate governments on the Korean peninsula. In the summer of 1950, the North invaded the South to force reunification, making national division permanent. In the DPRK, however, North Koreans are taught that the "US imperialists" and their "south Korean puppets" were the ones who crossed the line on June 25, 1950, in an attempt to colonize the whole peninsula. Myths such as these in the official North Korean history of the Korean War (1950-53) are either unfounded or exaggerated. The North Koreans, however, do not necessarily need to invent every detail. "The United States dropped more bombs on North Korea than it had during the entire Pacific campaign in World War II," North Korean defector Yeonmi Park writes, "[they] bombed every city and village, and they kept bombing until there were no major buildings left to destroy."⁴ Villages were set ablaze at night with napalm to force out guerillas. Irrigation dams were destroyed, inundating villages, cities, railways, highways, bridges, and rice paddies. These bombing targets left North Koreans on the brink of mass starvation, until Soviet aid arrived. In total, the North suffered about 2 million casualties, the majority in the conflict, constituting 15-20% of its population.⁵

Although the Korean War is sometimes referred to as the Forgotten War in the US, it is far from forgotten in North Korea, as propaganda art and literature routinely reinforce the

³ Lim, *Leader Symbols and Personality Cult in North Korea: The Leader State* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 56.

⁴ Yeonmi Park, Maryanne Vollers, *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom*, (New York, Penguin Press, 2015), 31.

⁵ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 78.

victim consciousness and collective trauma by emphasizing American atrocities committed during the brutal conflict. Common across almost all North Korean propaganda about the Korean War is a cardinal doctrine in the state religion: a Manichean worldview of good versus evil, oppressor versus oppressed, that assigns moral purity, innocence, and victimization to the oppressed Korean race, while attributing depravity, culpability, and sadism to the American oppressors. This simplistic and dehumanizing dichotomy is a powerful source of persuasion for the regime, for “a majority” of North Koreans believe in the anti-American propaganda, according to Andrei Lankov.⁶ Many defectors, like Yeonmi Park, found the propaganda very compelling as children. The harrowing myths elicit from North Koreans fear and disgust towards Americans, while inspiring ethnic solidarity and trust towards each other. By extension, this motivates North Koreans to either rally around the regime, or at the very least acquiesce to it, despite its coercive methods.



Figure 1.3: A painting from the Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities. This illustration, of Americans brutalizing Korean women and children, is relatively modest compared to the other exhibits in the museum.

2. Rituals

The sociologist Erving Goffman famously argued that all of life is a performance, where everyone is an actor fulfilling a role, presenting and maintaining a front to others, and switching out between different masks depending on their audience. There is perhaps no better example of his dramaturgical analysis than the theater state of North Korea. As Merkel wrote, North Korea is a highly performative society where “Public and private events, such as commemorations, celebrations, rituals, parades and festivals, as well as everyday life and routines, are all governed by a code,”⁷ called the Ten Principles of the Monolithic Ideological System. In essence, the Ten Principles require North Koreans to learn and memorize “the Great Leader’s Revolutionary thought, implementing his instructions and party policies, and struggling against hostile ideological elements,” according to Jae-cheon Lim. Since their publication in

⁶ James Jones, *Secret State of North Korea*, PBS Frontline, 2014.

⁷ Udo Merkel, “Arts, acrobatics and athleticism in North Korea: power, politics and propaganda,” in *Power, Politics and International Events: Socio-cultural Analyses of Festivals and Spectacles* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 147.

1974, they, along with their 65 clauses, have served as “the main legal source for rule-setting and monitoring the cult activities of [all] North Koreans,” being more powerful than even the constitution itself. The Ten Principles have been compared to the Ten Commandments of Christianity by many North Korean defectors, since “they display similar language patterns and have the same purpose of regulating the daily lives of their adherents.”⁸

Among the most important rituals of everyday life in North Korea are Organizational Life, where North Koreans are routinely indoctrinated in long meetings several times a week, and are required to perform critical self-purification sessions. Criticism sessions are also another way the state conducts surveillance on its people, not through directly policing their lives, but by making ordinary citizens complicit in the monitoring of society. During these sessions, North Koreans rarely ever admit actual deviations or snitch on peers, making them mostly performative activities, and although this may give the impression that they are ineffectual, this is not the case. A religion is more than just a set of propositions meant to inspire a believer to act in specific ways. It is an entire social network that connects people through intersections of symbolic significance. It is not just about belief, but also about action that leads to the formation and sustenance of a community, by individuals demonstrating commitment to an orthodoxy regardless of their degree of conviction. If Organizational Life rituals can cause people to act and possibly believe together, then they are efficacious in sustaining the regime’s power.

Organizational Life also serves other purposes. By constantly inundating people with information to memorize and making them incessantly prepare for meetings, North Koreans have less free time to think for themselves or pursue personal hobbies, according to defector Yuna Jung. Building on this claim, we can speculate that the time-consuming and all-encompassing nature of them also makes it extremely difficult, if near-impossible, for North Koreans to privately communicate or gather. This would by extension prevent them from either airing grievances against the regime, or organizing to plot against it.

Not all rituals in North Korea are so dry and austere. There are also national holidays such as Day of the Sun, and mass spectacles such as parades and Mass Games that artistically display the pillars of national solidarity and state power. As Suk-young Kim eloquently puts it, mass spectacles as performances “embody the collective ways of North Korean life in a literal sense, bringing the members of the family-nation into a physical space and thereby visually ascertaining the corporeal unity of the collective.”⁹ These rituals not only discipline the population, they more importantly elicit the universal sentiment of collective effervescence. When an activity such as a religious ritual, a music concert, a political convention, or a sporting match reaches a certain degree of emotional intensity, it produces an ephemeral but powerful social psychological phenomenon that elevates the psyches of participants from the level of mundane everyday life to the rare, ineffable sentiments of ecstasy. The participants at once “lose” themselves, yet become part of something larger; producing feelings ranging from bliss to delirium. The result is that the values of the group are affirmed and its unity is strengthened.

⁸ Lim, 2015, 24.

⁹ Suk-young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 58.

Despite their long and arduous rehearsals, many defectors have regarded mass rituals as some of the most memorable moments of their lives. “In North Korea,” defector Jae Young Kim recollected, “the enthusiasm to participate in mass gymnastic and dancing groups was so high that those who did not participate were considered weird.”¹⁰ The rituals of the North Korean state religion paint a more complicated picture of itself, expanding our question in regards to its effectiveness beyond the mere binary of belief and unbelief. Instead of simply being a set of propositions about reality, it is also a set of highly emotive activities and routines that successfully garner support or compliance from the true believer, the private skeptic, the agnostic, and the apathetic alike. In this way, we can conclude that the rituals of the North Korean state religion are efficacious in manufacturing the consent of the governed.



Figure 2.1: A float with the Workers’ Party flag passes through Kim Il Sung Square to commemorate the 110th anniversary of the founding leader’s birth. Image taken by Korean Central News Agency on April 15, 2022.

Conclusion

For decades, North Korea has been approached as both a national security problem and as humanitarian crisis that must be understood and resolved in terms of hard power and economic motives. It is also a culture, however, whose existence withstands the test of time through more subtle and covert methods of domination and survival; namely, through the manipulation of language, censorship of media, and politicization of art. The state goes even further than this, I argue, by offering North Korean a kind of nationalistic spirituality that is channeled through a strongman leader and his family. As Tatiana Gabrussenko, an expert on North Korean literature, has stated, “The ideological practices of North Korea are constructed according to the patterns of conventional monotheistic religion, with their own holy scripts and festivals, priests and disciples, catechisms and homilies.” The lived experiences of numerous North Korean defectors, such as Ji-Min Kang, corroborate with Gabrussenko and Jae-cheon

¹⁰ Jae Young Kim, “People Who Don’t Like The Mass Games Are Weird,” NK News, January 21, 2013, nknews.org/2013/01/people-who-didnt-like-mass-games-were-weird/.

Lim, since defectors often draw similarities between the personality cult and Christianity in particular.

One of the most momentous of events in the history of North Korea's state religion was the death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994, which shocked a majority of citizens and initiated an intense period of national bereavement. "It felt like the world was coming to an end," In-hua Kim recalls 25 years later, "A Democratic People's Republic of Korea without Kim Il Sung was unthinkable and so without him the Korean people felt that they no longer had any purpose in life." Even if Kim no longer lived on Earth, he lived on in the hearts and minds of his people. The myth of the Great Leader was routinely reinforced through propagandistic art and political rituals during his lifetime, and continues to be so today under Kim Jong Un through the state religion that his father Kim Jong Il built. By no means was In-hua's sentiments or of those she witnessed universal. In an interview with Barbara Demick, "Mrs. Song" felt a sharp disappointment when she realized that the North Korean regime would continue under Kim Jong Il. "Now we're really fucked," she remembers uttering to herself. Mrs. Song's prognostication was all too prescient, as North Korean society transition to a catastrophic famine that killed between 3-5% of the DPRK population, or 600,000 to 1 million people.¹¹

The "Arduous March" famine, as it is officially called in North Korea, was a human failure that not only resulted in the collapse of the socialist system, but also gave birth to a new generation of North Koreans who are more skeptical of the regime's propaganda and less faithful to the Kim family. They are known as the *jangmadang* generation, named after the North Korean word for market. Women have become breadwinners for their families by selling smuggled goods from across the Chinese border while their husbands are forced to "work" at state enterprises. In addition to miscellaneous foodstuffs and hard currency (mostly Chinese yuan), DVDs, CDs, laptops, radios, and USB drives, containing foreign media such as South Korean pop music and dramas, Chinese TV shows, and American films, are also making their way into North Korea. Clothes and make-up from China, Japan, America, and South Korea (and their knock-off forms) end up on the *jangmadang* markets too, allowing North Koreans to subtly rebel against the state-mandated restrictions on fashion. Cheap cell phones and radios smuggled across the border help North Koreans coordinate defections, keep in touch with family members, and hear foreign news. While the North Korean government does not like the rise of market activity, the regime simply has no choice but to tolerate it to avoid another famine.

The *jangmadang* generation, by importing outside knowledge, growing private communication, and cultivating self-sufficiency, is laying the foundations for change in North Korea. Although exact figures cannot be known, the broad consensus among defectors is that only a minority of North Koreans buys-into the propaganda now. "It is not wrong to say [that North Koreans] believed propaganda 100% before the death of Kim Il Sung," Mina Yoon stated in 2014, "Nowadays, people believe less than 20% of what is being televised or broadcast." However, not all propaganda is of equal quality or effect, and the minority who either believe or tolerate the system is still substantial. Many North Koreans old enough to remember the Kim

¹¹ Marcus Noland, "Famine and Reform in North Korea," *Asian Economic Papers* Vol. 3, no. 2 (2005): 18.

Il Sung era still have nostalgia for it because of its larger-than-life leader and relative economic stability. According to defector Yuna Jung, if South Korea or especially the US were to invade the DPRK, hundreds of thousands would lay down their lives for the regime because of the impact of anti-American propaganda and the leader cults. Since it is unlikely that a war would feasibly resolve the situation, nor do economic sanctions appear to be improving it, the only people who can truly change North Korea are the North Korean people themselves. Once the people become fully aware of their oppression, the state religion will look too delusional for them to believe or pretend to believe, and they will rise up.

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