

## Swampist

A film about Koryo Saram, Migrants and Oral history in New York City

### PROLOGUE



#### Swamp illuminated history

July 1, 2023. Gravesend, Brooklyn, became the stage where the convergence of cultures, stories, and histories unfolded. A seemingly ordinary birthday party transformed into an abstract tapestry of the intricate intersections of identity, migration, and memory. Around 100 attendees celebrated the 70th birthday, Hwan-Gap-Jan-Chi, of Lily Tyan and Iliya Paygay—Koryo Saram owners of the evocative Korean-Uzbeki-Russian Café Lily. Their banquet hall, vast in its expanse, became a living museum, reverberating with the rich stories of the Koryo Saram immigrants' community. Spanning Brooklyn and Queens, these tales emanated from Joseon, Soviet Union, Central Asia, Russia to America, revealing the documented and undocumented migration narratives that found comfort on American lands. The room vibrated with more than just Koryo Saram voices. Eun-Joo Kang of Woorigarak Korean Cultural Arts Center (WKCAC) ushered in 20 Koreans, including artists, for a traditional performance. They embodied the dual identity of migrants from South Korea and Korean Americans. An added visual texture was the presence of Lily and Iliya's White Russian friends and the Brown and Black cinematographers filming for *Swampist*.

The banquet spread was a metaphor for cultural amalgamation— from Лепешка (Lepeshka, Uzbeki Bread), Shish Kebab, Borscht, Plov, tomato and cucumber salad covered with dill, cobb salad, corn bread, key lime pie, Kimchi, 고사리 (Fern) salad, to the rhythmic beats of 한복 (Hanbok, a traditional clothing of Korean people) and the melodies of 반갑습니다(Bangapseumnida, a prevalent North Korean music). As the MC heralded the unique

celebration of Koryo Saram's 70 years living, the atmosphere was electric. This wasn't just a party; it was a serious play of identity, culture, and belonging. The post-dinner spectacle unveiled yet another layer of complexity. An Uzbeki songstress serenaded the audience, and as Lily, Iliya, and their family shifted from traditional 한복 to Western gowns, it symbolized the perpetual dance of identity the Koryo-Saram continually engage in.

As an attendee, my vantage was unique. From an initial association as a Café Lily staff, my relationship with the Koryo Saram community evolved. It metamorphosed from functional roles to familial ties of the Koryo Saram community members. On this special day, I stood as a bridge, connecting Koryo Saram with South Koreans, acting as both a recorder of oral history and a filmmaker. In the shadow of a divided Korean history, our collective spirit mirrored that of sponges—soaking up the diverse linguistic, culinary, sartorial, musical, spiritual, geographical, and narrative nuances. Shielding ourselves from the painful shards of our shared past, we played our parts meticulously. We became swampists—entities that thrived in the richness of swampism, a symbiotic coexistence of varied histories, stories, and futures.

## 0. Symbols of Swamp and Swampism

The symbolism of the swamp is multifaceted. Just as a swamp is a place of coexistence—where elements of land and water meet and apart synchronously—so too is the history of the Koryo Saram a confluence of diverse identities, histories, and experiences. By invoking Fernando Pessoa's notion of 'swampism', I seek to draw a parallel between the swamp's ecological role and the Koryo Saram's intricate, layered history and identity.

### 1. Swampism: A Theoretical Frame

Fernando Pessoa's 'swampism' offers a philosophical lens to understand the inherent fluidity and multiplicity of human experience and identities. Swamps, by nature, are places of convergence, where land meets water, fostering a rich biodiversity. Similarly, 'swampism' celebrates the confluence of various identities, memories, and histories. For Koryo Saram, this concept aptly illustrates their layered experiences, defined by migration, adaptation, and cultural amalgamation. The celebration for Koryo Saram, Lily and Iliya, with its cultural expressions, is a manifestation of the multiplicity and complexity. The fluid movement from 한복 (Hanbok) to Western evening dresses, the melange of musical influences, and the blend of cuisines, all exemplify the coexistence of multiple histories, traditions, and identities within the Koryo Saram.

### 2. The Landscape of the Swamp and the Historical Tapestry of Koryo Saram

The Koryo Saram community's origin lies in their migration from Joseon to Russian Empire, Soviet Union, Central Asia, and America, an exodus driven by political,

economic, and social upheavals. Their multifaceted identity, shaped by their unique historical and geographical contexts, embodies a convergence of Korean, Central Asian, and Russian cultural influences. This hybrid identity finds resonance in the swamp metaphor - a mysterious space that is neither completely water nor land but a mixture of both, much like the Koryo Saram's fluid cultural identity. Swamps are ecotones—transitional areas where two ecosystems meet, resulting in a unique biodiversity. Similarly, the Koryo Saram exist at the confluence of Central Asian, Russian, and Korean cultures, embodying a rich mosaic of traditions. Their layered history is reminiscent of the swamp's depths, with each layer holding stories of migration, cultural preservation, adaptation, and resilience.

### 3. Migration and Memory: A Journey Through Fluid Landscapes

Migration stories are the heartbeats of diaspora narratives. In the life stories of the Koryo Saram, migration takes on multifaceted meanings. Their journey is more than just geographical—it reflects shifts in identity, cultural practices, allegiances, and memory. The swamp, with its fluid landscape, symbolizes this flux, mirroring the transient and transformative nature of the migrant experience. The event in Gravesend serves as a microcosm of the larger Koryo Saram experience. From the Korean culinary spread to the Arirang dance performances, from the Uzbeki dishes spreads to the Khorazm rhythm, symbolizing the blending of cultures and the preservation of traditions. Through a 'swampist' lens, I can perceive these manifestations as dynamic interactions, much like the swamp's ecosystem where various elements co-exist, interact, and thrive.

### 4. Oral Historians: The Chroniclers of the Swamp capturing the Fluid Narratives

Oral history, as a method, captures the lived experiences and personal narratives of individuals, making it an invaluable tool to document the nuanced stories of migrant communities like the Koryo Saram. The oral historian acts as a bridge, connecting the past with the present, the personal with the collective. Much like the swamp, oral histories are repositories of memories, offering depth and richness in their narratives. If history is a swamp, replete with hidden depths, oral historians are also its navigators. Their role is analogous to that of the swamp: absorbing, preserving, and connecting diverse stories and memories. By recording and transmitting tales, they ensure that the community's narratives—like the unique flora of a swamp—are neither faint nor forgotten in the tides of time.

### 5. The Role of Community: Being Swampists in a Divided World

The world, with its borders and divisions, often relegates diasporic communities to the margins. But in these margins, much like the ecotones of a swamp, unique cultures thrive. As "swampists," the Koryo Saram and those who engage actively absorb, adapt, and reflect the richness of their heritage collectively. Their "swampism" is an act of resistance against the erasure of their stories, ensuring that their collective history still remains illuminated in a divided world.



#### Embracing Swampism in Understanding Unique Migration Histories:

The Koryo Saram community's complex tapestry of experiences underscores the importance of adopting a 'swampist' approach in understanding unique migration histories. By viewing their stories through the prism of 'swampism', I acknowledge the depth, fluidity, and multiplicity inherent in their narratives. As I continue to engage with diverse migrant experiences, Fernando Pessoa's concept offers a compelling framework, urging me to delve deeper, explore the convergences, and the rich biodiversity of human experiences. The celebration in Brooklyn transcended the bounds of a mere event; it epitomized the intermingling of histories, the fluidity of identities, and the power of narratives. Through the evocative symbolism of 'swampism', the intricate dance of history, memory, and identity that defines the Koryo Saram becomes vividly apparent. The swamp, in all its depths and diversities, stands as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of communities like the Koryo Saram, illuminating the paths they have traversed and the histories they carry with them.

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