

The Spirit of Korean Cultural Roots 2

# NORIGAE

Splendor of the Korean Costume



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# *Norigae*

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# Table of Contents

## *Norigae* Splendor of the Korean Costume

<b>Foreword</b> : A “Window” to Our Culture	5
<b>I. What is <i>Norigae</i>?</b>	
1. History of <i>Norigae</i>	12
2. The Basic Form of <i>Norigae</i>	15
<b>II. The Composition of <i>Norigae</i></b>	
1. Composition and Size	20
2. Materials	24
3. Crafting Techniques	26
<b>III. The Symbolism of <i>Norigae</i></b>	
1. Shapes of <i>Norigaes</i>	30
2. Charm <i>Norigaes</i>	32
3. Wishing <i>Norigaes</i>	34
4. <i>Norigaes</i> for Eternal Youth and Longevity	36
5. <i>Norigaes</i> for Practical Use	37
<b>IV. Different types of <i>Norigae</i></b>	
1. Large Three-part <i>Norigae</i>	40
2. Three-part <i>Norigae</i>	46
3. Silver One-part <i>Norigae</i>	60
4. White Jade One-part <i>Norigae</i>	63
5. Enameled One-part <i>Norigae</i>	66
6. <i>Norigaes</i> to Wish for Sons	69

7.	Ornamental Knife <i>Norigae</i>	72
8.	Needle Case <i>Norigae</i>	76
9.	Acupuncture Needle Case ( <i>Chintong</i> ) <i>Norigae</i>	79
10.	Locust Leg( <i>Bangadari</i> ) <i>Norigae</i>	83
11.	Perfume Case( <i>Hyang-gap</i> ) <i>Norigae</i>	85
12.	Perfume Bar <i>Norigae</i>	94
13.	Turquoise Perfume Bead Curtain <i>Norigae</i>	98
14.	Embroidered Perfume Pouch <i>Norigae</i>	100
<b>V. <i>Norigaes</i> and Customs</b>		
1.	Wearing <i>Norigae</i>	110
2.	Formal Rules of Wearing <i>Norigae</i>	114
3.	<i>Norigae</i> and the Seasons	116
4.	Weddings, Funerals and <i>Norigae</i>	119
<b>VI. The Aesthetics of <i>Norigae</i></b>		
1.	The Aesthetics of <i>Norigae</i>	122
2.	In Closing: Modern <i>Hanbok</i> and the <i>Norigae</i>	127
	<b>List of Pictures</b>	132

# I. What is *Norigae*?



1. History of *Norigae*
2. The Basic Form of *Norigae*

# 1 History of *Norigae*

*Norigae* is a decorative pendant hung from the outer or inner breast-tie of the short upper garment(*jeogori*), or sashes of the traditional Korean women's costume called "*hanbok*." It was an accessory item exclusive to the Joseon dynasty and was made of precious materials such as gold, silver or jade. The decorative designs and ornamental details of *norigae* made it the focal point of women's apparel and created a stark contrast against the generally subdued and understated *hanbok*.

The word "*norigae*" originally refers to "pretty and playful objects" or "favorite trinkets." True to these meanings, *norigaes* were cherished and worn by women of all classes: queens, princesses, concubines, ladies-in-waiting, noblewomen, and commoners alike. However, the *norigaes* were of different sizes and materials – all of which were dictated by the social rank of the wearer. Women also were expected to wear different *norigaes* depending on the time, place, occasion, season or ceremonial event.

It is difficult to pinpoint when the *norigae* came to be widely worn. We can only guess that primitive forms of personal ornaments like *norigaes* can be traced back to prehistoric times, since the innate human desire for self-embellishment is one of the key drivers behind the development of clothing. The history of personal ornaments actually began when primitive men strung the tooth of wild animals they killed and wore it around their waists.

Similarly, Choi Namsun(1890~1957), in his book entitled

*Introduction to Korean Literature*, writes that the origin of *norigae* was the protective emblem used in primitive shamanism. These emblems were referred to as “*jema*(除魔)” which means “to overpower evil,” and children were made to wear these.<sup>1</sup> But the artifact that can be considered a true archetype of the *norigae* is the waist pendant unearthed from ancient tombs of the Silla dynasty. A wide variety of decorative items were found in Silla tombs, including crowns and crown ornaments, hair ornaments, earrings, necklaces, belts, bracelets, and rings. However, by the Joseon dynasty, necklaces and bracelets disappeared, and women only wore rings, head ornaments, such as ornamental toques(*jokduri*) and rod-shaped hairpins(*binyeo*), and the *norigae*, which may be defined as either a chest or a waist ornament.

Among the existing historical documents, *Goryeo Dogyeong*(高麗圖經, 1223, an illustrated book depicting the lifestyle of the Goryeo people),<sup>2</sup> written by a Chinese official of the Sung dynasty named Seo Geung, records that “the aristocratic women of Goryeo dynasty ... wrapped their waists with olive green sashes, from which they hung gold bells with colored ribbons and silk pouches filled with incense.” This description evokes images of Joseon women who would later embellish their dresses with *norigaes* and small decorative pouches. Buddhist paintings from the Goryeo dynasty also depict queens wearing jade ornaments attached to decorative knots and suspended below the waistline.

These and other accounts indicate that such small ornaments existed from prehistoric times, and that, as *hanbok* established itself in the basic form of short top and long skirt, *norigae* also became an important ornament which complemented the short *jeogori*. The widespread popularity of *norigaes* can be attributed to the fact that it appealed to the aesthetic and emotional senses of Joseon women.

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1. *Introduction to Korean Literature*, Yookdang Choi Nansun(Yookdang being a literary pseudonym), Complete Collection V. 9, p. 451.

2. Seo Geung, *Goryeo Dogyeong* V. 20, Women's clothing.



clasp  
cord

main ornament

knot

tassel

[Picture 1] The composition of Norigae



[Picture 2] Bride

*Lifestyle and Customs of the Joseon Era Depicted with Photographs*