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**Korean Shamanism and Cultural Nationalism**

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INTRODUCTION

My fascination with shamanism began in 1987, when I came into direct contact with its practices, on returning to my native Korea after an absence of nearly twenty years. I only vaguely remembered the shamanistic ritual, called kut, which used to be held by women, mainly in the countryside, as noisy, colourful, and strangely eerie events. I was surprised, however, to find that kut was often performed by university students, and was sometimes presented in a well attended theatre by a famous shaman, called mudang, who has been declared a “human cultural treasure’ by the government. I was also intrigued to notice that shamanism was an object of serious academic research by various scholars, as well as being protected by the government as a cultural heritage to be cherished. Why, then is shamanism, which has suffered centuries of official persecution for being the undesirable ‘primitive’ element in Korean society, enjoying a revival among some educated elites whose religious affiliations are Christianity, Buddhism, etc, as well as managing to survive so persistently among people in rapidly industrializing modern Korea? To find the answer, it is necessary to study Korean shamanism in detail, and its influence on the lives of the Korean people in the past as well as the present.

DEFINITIONS OF THE SHAMAN AND SHAMANISM

The various aspects and manifestations of shamanism itself are still shrouded in considerable ambiguity and controversy, despite comprehensive studies spanning over two centuries and a large number of publications on it. At one extreme, the concept of shamanism itself is septically viewed; Geertz [page 2] mentions shamanism among the “desiccated” and “insipid” categories “by means of which ethnographers of religion devitalize their data,” and Spencer (1968) questions even the existence of such a phenomenon as shamanism. At the other extreme, La Barre (1970) claims that shamanism is the “basis of all religion,” since the construct god is based on the shamanistic man-god.

Shamanism is notoriously difficult to define, since the term tends to be used in a wide variety of senses. Shamanism is best defined in terms of who and what the shaman is. Some scholars, for example, most British anthropologists, are extremely reluctant to use the term, while some others tend to abuse it without inhibition to refer to any practitioner of non-western religious phenomenon which is beyond their comprehension. It is, therefore, important to present working definitions of the shaman.

Shamans have been known as ‘medicine men,’ ‘witch doctors,’ ‘exor-cists,’ ‘magicians,’ ‘visionaries,’ ‘mediums,’ ‘sorcerers,’ ‘rainmakers,’ ‘necromancers,’ ‘oracles,’ to name but a few, and at times all these ‘religious specialists’ have indiscriminately been called ‘shamans,’ Since the term ‘shaman’ is generally thought to have come from the Tungustic saman (Shi-rokogoroff, 1935), North Asia seems to be a logical place to look for a definition of it. According to the Evenki,shamans are capable of having direct contact with the spirit world through ecstasy, controlling spirits and using their power for helping other people who suffer illnesses or misfortune, attributed to the influence of malignant spirits. Shamans have the recognized abilities to achieve ecstasy, summon their guardian spirits, and with their help, ascend to heaven or descend to hell, to bring back the lost soul, or fight with and win over evil spirits, which cause illnesses or misfortune, and thus obtain the cure. They have ritual codes and paraphernalia, which are socially sanctioned and enjoy a privileged social status.

One of the most important features of shamans is, their will and control, being able “to transcend the human conditions and pass freely back and forth through different cosmological planes”(Furst, 1972). Most of all, they can will themselves into ecstasy and in the midst of such a radical transformation, are simultaneously aware of the ordinary reality (Harner, 1980). Hence a somewhat comic situation described by Kendall (1985), in which a possessed Korean shamaness asks for her rubber shoes before going outside during a kut, becomes perfectly understandable. This is what differentiates shamans from spirit mediums; the former are fully aware of what transpires in the altered state of consciousness, whereas the latter have no recollection of their visionary episodes afterwards, having merely acted as passive channels for the received revelations. [page 3]

Shamans are especially healers, but they also engage in divination, mak-ing use of their abilities to see into the present, past, and future. Hence shamans are clairvoyants, but not all seers are shamans, since divination is only one of the many aspects of shamanism.

Shamans are empiricists, in the sense that they “act on observation or experiment, not on theory,” and “regard sense-data as valid information”, “(Oxford English Dictionary) They depend primarily on firsthand experience of the senses to acquire knowledge.

Shamans are people of action as well as knowledge. They serve the community by moving into and out of the hidden reality when asked for help. Thus they are highly sensitive to social needs and can improvise ritual procedures as the need arises. Harvey (1979), who studied the socialization of six Korean shamanesses, also remarks on their “above average capacity for creative improvisation.”

Shamans are highly social people, being the central figures in rituals, which are an integral part of shamanism. Thus their priestly function is important, and for that reason shamanistic vocation is often followed by years of training and initiation. Thus some people cannot become shamans, despite possession sickness, through a lack of funds for training, and remain as mostly individual spiritual specialists, such as fortune-tellers, exorcists or spirit mediums (Akiba,1957 ;Yu,1975)

Last but not least, shamans are largely altruistic people who guard the welfare of their clients close at heart, although in some tribes, e.g. the Buryat, there exist ‘black’ shamans, practitioners of sorcery. Shamanistic vocation is often received with extreme reluctance even by shamans who enjoy a special social position. It is attributed to mankind’s ambivalent attitude towards the sacred (Park, 1938; Eliade, 1951). In Korean society, where the shamans’ sta-tus is traditionally very low, becoming a shaman involves a great self-sacri- fice for the initiate，particularly if she/lie is of good social class. Their self- sacrifice calls forth a commensurate emotional commitment from their patients, a sense of obligation to struggle. Most shamans I have met are warm, caring people. As Harner (1980) aptly puts it, “caring and curing go hand in hand.”

Thus Lebra’s definition (cited in Harvey, 1979) has a more universal value: shamans wield recognized supernatural powers for socially approved ends and have the capacity to enter culturally acknowledged trance states at will.

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POSSESSION SICKNESS AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

There are two methods of recruiting shamans: hereditary transmission and spontaneous vocation (‘call, or ‘election,) (Eliade, 1951). Lowie (1963) argues that a shaman acquires his status only by divine inspiration, not by heredity or learned skills. Heredity, however, is not absolute; even in the case of hereditary shamans, divine intervention plays a part. Among the Buryat, for example, although both methods of recruitment are in force, in either case, the shaman’s vocation is manifested by dreams and convulsions, both provoked by ancestral spirits, who choose a young man in the family. Among the Altaians, where the shamanic gift is generally hereditary, a child who is to become a shaman proves to be sickly, withdrawn, and contemplative. Akiba (1957), in discussing shamanism in Korea, also remarks that the shamanistic predisposition seems to be hereditary. In Korea, this predisposition is called puri or ‘root,’ which is supposed to exist both patrilaterally and matrilaterally and in the case of a female, also in her husband’s family. Thus the distinction between spontaneous vocation and hereditary transmission gets somewhat blurred, although there are broadly two different types of shamans in Korea, i. e., god-descended shamans and hereditary ones.

According to a shaman, Mr. Park In-o, Vice-president of the Korean Spirit Worshippers’ Association for Victory Over Communism and the director of the Musok-pojon-hwe, a shaman training institute, there are three different ways in which spirits descend on people. The first and the most common is through sickness, the second through financial ruin, and the third and the most feared, through deaths of loved ones, called indari, meaning the “human bridge,” Sometimes all three can happen in turn. In the midst of these extreme sufferings, the first sign of a ‘choice’ from above manifests itself in what is commonly called ‘possession sickness,’ which has been likened to acute schizophrenia (Silverman, 1967), and other forms of mental illnesses, because of a remarkable similarity between people suffering from it and psychopaths. They get meditative and dreamy, seek solitude, seem absent-minded, and have prophetic visions and sometimes seizures that make them unconscious. They lose appetite and sleep, and often wander off alone to the mountain or forest. They occasionally find shamanic objects buried by shamans who died without leaving successors (Eliade, 1951; Akiba, 1957).

Many of my numerous shaman-informants have told me their life experiences of possession sickness before becoming shamans. Let us consider a couple of cases:

Mr. Pang Ch’ange-hwan (b.1943), one of the most successful male [page 5] shamans today, first experienced possession sickness at the age of nineteen. He was locked away in a mental asylum three times, and attempted suicide innumerable times. As a result of the shock, his father died. On the third night after his father’s death, at around 1 a.m. he had a vision in which his father’s tomb split open, and his father, carrying an octagonal table in his left hand and a staff in his right hand came out of it. He came down the mountain and said, “Get up quickly and take this table.” He took it, and taking off all his clothes, he dashed out into the snow-covered garden. He poured a bowl of icy water all over his naked body, murmuring. “Filthy, dirty, and disgusting!” He got a job at a trading company at 29, but was unable to continue with his career, since the spirits started building indari around him, i.e. his close relatives started dying. The following year, he had an initiation rite, by Pama Manshin (Perm Shaman), becoming her spirit son.

Another successful male shaman, Mr. Cho Cha-ryong (b.1946), as a child often had visions of his grandfather who had covertly practised the shamanistic profession. He tried to commit suicide at the age of thirteen, but survived. A year after his marriage at the age of 26, he was given a death sentence by his doctor, after his condition was diagnosed as blood cancer. As a last resort, he asked a shaman, who said that it was caused by the spirit descent. After various experiences with the spirits, he had a series of naerim kut (initiation rite), after which he was cured. He has had no serious health problems since then.

A first-class performer of the Seoul area kut, Pang Ch’un-ja (b.1939), experienced the spirit descent at the age of 14, as a result of which her father threw her out with only a tram ticket. She was trained under extremely difficult circumstances by her spirit mother until the age of 21, when, disguising her vocation, she was married off to a Christian. She immediately got sick, and nearly died. The spirits told her to resume her shamanistic career, or she would die, which obliged her to start “serving the spirits again.” Her husband’s violent objections broke up her marriage. She tried to be independent, trying her hand at various businesses, none of which was successful. After suffering a succession of misfortunes, which included losing all her money and an attempted suicide, she decided to accept the spirits. Since then, she has prospered, becoming a most successful shaman.

These, and over 100 other cases I have collected all fit Eliade’s traditional schema of the future shaman’s vocation: suffering, death, and resurrection. The Siberian shamans’ first ecstatic visionary experience almost always include one or more of the following themes: the dismemberment of their own bodies, their blood sucked by ‘devils,’, followed by a renewal of the [page 6] internal organs, ascent to the sky and dialogue with the spirits, and descent to the underworld and conversations with spirits and the souls of dead shamans about various secrets of the shamanic profession (Eliade, 1951). The Korean shamans I have talked to all have undergone similar experience: suffering and death, or near death, visions of the spirits, followed by the cure.

A shamanic vocation, be it hereditary or by divine election, is obligatory: one cannot refuse it. A person who receives the call suffers a mysterious illness or the above-mentioned misfortune until she/he obeys it and becomes a shaman. However, she/he cannot become a shaman without several years of training and being initiated at an initiation rite, called naerim-kut. The naerim-kut is a rite of passage for the shaman, in which the ‘psychopath’ dies and is reborn as a consecrated shaman by demonstrating her/his mystical capacities. From then on, the teacher shaman is called the spirit father or spirit mother. On becoming a fully-fledged shaman, the person recovers completely from the illness or other misfortunes, which recur if she/he stops shamanizing. Here lies the main difference between a shaman and a psychopath, i.e. a shaman is a sick person who has cured her/himself and is prepared to cure others suffering from similar or other ailments.

CHARACTERISTICS OF KOREAN MUSOK

The equivalent of the shaman in Korean is 무mu9 which is based on the visually explanatory Chinese character, 巫 It represents the linking of heaven (ㅡ) and earth (ᅳ) through two humans (ㅆ) dancing in the air. The existence of a great number of words referring to the mu bears witness to the extent to which shamanism has pervaded Korean society throughout its long history. The most generally used word for ‘shaman’ is mudang, although it usually refers to shamanesses, who predominate in number. The male shaman is called, most commonly, paksu, or paksu mudang. The female and male are collectively called, mugyok mu meaning the former and gyok the latter. The regional and other variations are:

Female: mudang, posal, manshim, munyo, tanggol, songwan, myongdo, etc.

Male: paksu, popsa, tosa, poksa, chaein, hwarang, shinjang, snimbang, etc.

The terms reveal the extensive syncretism of Korean musok with foreign religions; for example, posal and popsa came from Buddhism, while tosa and songwan are Taoist terms.

Mudang is generally believed to have the same origin as the Mongolian [page 7] udagan, the Buryat udayan, the Yakut udoyan, which all mean ‘shamaness.’ The influence of the Chinese character ‘mu’ may have given the initial sound ‘m,’ making it mudang (Akiba, 1957; Yu, 1975; Kim, 1987). The most commonly used term for a male mu, paksu, likewise can be linked with the Tun-gustic baksi, the Mongolian baksi or balsi, the Goldi paksi, the Manchu faksi, the Orochon paktjine (Akiba, 1957) and also the Kazak Kirgiz baqca (Eliade, 1951), which all refer to a male shaman.

Shamanism in Korea is usually referred to as musok, which literally means “popular mu practice,” or even mugyo (mu religion) by some scholars (Yu, 1975; Cho, 1984, 1990) who argue that Korean musok is a religion. Although it fits in with Tylor’ s broadest definition of religion, “belief in spiritual beings,” it cannot be called a religion for various reasons. First of all, although there exist the priest (mudang) and the ritual (kut), there is no written scripture (scanty records of the ritual procedures for instruction of shamans do exist, but they can hardly be called a scripture), thus the ritual and even ideologies are somewhat fluid, since they are passed on mostly verbally. Secondly, it is only concerned with the profane and this worldliness, the spirits being merely used to achieve the aims of the living. The gods do not enter people’s consciousness until a disaster strikes them, and as soon as the crisis is over, they are equally quickly forgotten; thus a shaman shrine is not believed to be inhabited by a particular spirit to which it is dedicated, but a place to which it descends, only when invoked. Thirdly, there is no focal figure, such as the founder, as in the great religions of the world. The spirits themselves are numerous and highly fluid in character. The polite term of address for a shamaness, manshin (literally ten thousand spirits) implies that she controls all the spirits, which number “ten thousand.” Many culture heroes in Korean history appear as gods; gods are invented as a need arises, and stop existing when they have served their useful purposes. A feared disease is believed to be the responsibility of a specific god, as in the case of mama-shin (Smallpox God). When an epidemic of smallpox, which was introduced in the fifteenth century from abroad, ravaged the Korean population, mama-kut was one of the most important and frequently performed kuts. Today the eradication of the once-dreaded disease means the disappearance of mama-kut, which only remains in sketchy records, and according to Mr. Shim Wu-song, a folklorist and folk dramatist, in a few regional community kuts. Finally, but perhaps most significantly, shamanism can and is practised alongside another religions, in the way no two other religions can.

In musok, gods are not worshipped metaphysically, but used as a means to obtain this wordly goals. Thus a kut is less a sacred exercise, and more a [page 8] very profane “strategic party,” in which spirits participate as honoured guests, enjoying food, drink, lively conversation, drama and other entertainment provided by man. Humans hope that spirits will reciprocate by granting them their wishes. In other words, gods and humans communicate freely with one another on equal terms at a kut, where the latter obligate the former to reciprocate, by means of various gifts.

Thus the most fundamental difference between Siberian and Korean shamanisms lies in the fact that in a Siberian shamanistic seance, the shaman makes a journey into heaven or descends into hell aided by his helping spirits, whereas in a kut the shaman, entering into ecstasy through frenzied dancing, invites the spirits to descend and join the human gatherings. Yu (1975) attributes the difference to the different lifestyles of the Siberian and Korean peoples. Thus the Siberians, pastoral nomads, actively travel to seek spirits, while the latter, settled agrarians, stay put, passively inviting and receiving spirits as guests.

The above hypothesis, however, does not fit in many other similar situations. For example, Potter (in Wolf, ed, 1974) describes how a Cantonese shamaness makes an upward journey into the Heavenly Flower Garden, possessed and helped by her ‘familiar’ spirits, meeting the souls of the assembled crowd’s deceased relatives and neighbours, who speak through her. Cantonese society is also a settled agrarian one, so if the above hypothesis worked, the Cantonese shamaness would also invite the spirits down, instead of making a journey herself. Therefore Yu’s explanation is purely one scholar’s conjectural interpretation, which lacks universality.

A more probable explanation may be the influence of the ancient Korean belief, according to which, singing, dancing, eating and drinking make spirits appear (Hyon, 1986). The Korean word for “to get excited,elated or ecstatic”is shinnada, which literally means “spirits have appeared.” Thus the rhythmic drumbeat and frenzied dancing that send the shaman into ecstasy cause the spirits to descend on the scene, possessing the shaman in her state of trance and speaking through her.

Another way of making gods descend is singing long biographical epic songs about them, based on the principle, “Talk of the devil, and he will appear” (Hyon, 1986). What is interesting is that taryong (mostly frequently rendered in Chinese characters, 打令, meaning ‘‘striking an order”), which refers to all ballads, can literally mean, “compromising with spirits”(妥靈).

The shamanic costumes and paraphernalia are also vital, since it is believed that spirits recognize their own clothes and objects, and descend on them. Thus a great manshin possesses a huge collection of various costumes, [page 9] which are often donated by her clients, called tanggol/shindo (regulars/believers). Only a few of these costumes are used at an ordinary kut, the whole collection only being displayed and worn at her own kut, called chinjok-kut.

In appreciation for their appearance, and by way of supplication, the spirits are then regally entertained with food, drink, song, dance, and drama. Sometimes clothes and money are given to them to curry their favour. Thus ‘entertainment’ is one of the most important aspects of Korean shamanism, which distinguishes it from other shamanisms of the world. When a kut is in progress in the neighbourhood, the noise can be heard miles away, and food and drink are given to anyone who happens to be nearby or passing by. That even applies to chapgwi (sundry ghosts), which are always fed at the end, as part of the ritual procedure, called twitjon.

Another distinguishing feature of Korean musok is the existence of hereditary ‘priests’ called sesupmu, alongside god-descended shamans called kangshinmu, who are all called by the same name, mudang. Although they share basically the same functions, the most important of which is performing kuts, there is an essential difference between them. Kangshinmu, the god- descended type, get possessed by spirits and practise kongsu (spirits speaking through the shaman) during a kut, whereas spirit possession, thus kongsu, is absent in susupmu. The god-descended ones are the accepted norm north of the Han River, while the hereditary ones predominate to the south of the Han River and along the east coast of Korea, and at one time nationally outnumbered the real shamans (Akiba, 1957)

The hereditary mudangs also have regional variations. Those in the southern counties of Honam and Yongnam are mostly female; in the former areas they are called tanggol (regulars), and in the latter mudang or mudang gakssi (mudang bride). Although the lineage is patrilineal, the profession is often passed down from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law; a mudang’s daughter marries another mudang’s son,thus learning her trade from her mother-in-law. The husband, who is called kongin in the Honam area and yangjung or hwraengi in the Yongdong area, and hwaraengi or sani in the Kyonggi area, south of the Han River, works as her assistant, usually playing the hourglass-shaped drums called changgu. On the east coast of Korea male and female mudangs co-exist; the females are called mudang or mudang gakssi, and the male yangjung, hwaraengi or paraji. Unlike those in the Honam area, who have a territory of regular customers, they form a group, usually by blood or marriage, get together only when there is a kut to perform, and normally live in different areas. Unlike tanggol mudang in the south, who are settled in one place, those on the east coast are highly mobile; [page 10] thus even their hourglass drums are smaller in size than those in other areas, and are collapsible for ease of transportation. The ritual song, dance and paraphernalia are supposed to keep to the ancient form which is rare elsewhere. In Chejudo, the island county off the southwest coast, the two types of mudangs co-exist.

In view of the existence of these hereditary mudangs and other differences, opinions are divided among the Korean scholars who have studied musok as to whether it can be termed shamanism or not. First Yim Sok-jae (1971) argues that it is an indigenous religious phenomenon, totally different from Siberian shamanism in terms of rituals, shamanic costumes, paraphernalia, dance and music, and thus should not be called shamanism. Secondly, Choi Kil-song (1969) maintains that only the central and northern variety is shamanism, the southern variety being a residue of the indigenous primitive beliefs. Thirdly, Kim Tae-gon (1969) suggests that all forms of Korean musok are essentially a kind of shamanism, though it has undergone a certain metamorphosis in the south owing to the cultural differences between the north and the south. He applies Weber’s theory of ‘routinization of charisma’ to explain the differences between the two types of mudangs.

To begin with, to say that musok is a totally different religious phenomenon from Siberian shamanism, there are too many parallels between the two, for example, the similar terms, symbols used and ritual gestures, as well as the basic principles. Even the paraphernalia used in the rituals, such as the important drum, rattles/bells, are remarkably similar. The superficial differences, such as the costumes, can be accounted for by the extremely fluid nature of shamanism itself, which is highly adaptable to the society in which it occurs.

Some anthropologists, such as Laurel Kendall (1985) refer to sesupmu as “priests,” totally avoiding the term ‘shaman,’ Many scholars of shamanism (Weiss in Harner ed, 1973; Lowie, 1954) make a clear distinction between the shaman and the priest. The shaman obtains his powers primarily from direct contact with spirits, operates independently, often on a part-time basis, deals mainly with individuals, particularly for purposes of curing, and is associated with activities characterized by possession, trance/ecstasy, and frenzy. On the other hand, the priest achieves his status through special training, is a member of an organization consisting of full-time specialists, leads group activities of a ceremonial nature, and conducts routine propitiatory acts of adoration, prayer, and offering. (Shirokogoroff, 1923; Lowie, 1940; Norbeck, 1961; citeu in Weiss in Harner, ed., 1973) Viewed from this perspective, sesupmu cannot be called ‘priests’ either, being closer to shamans. They are mostly [page 11] part-time practitioners with special abilities to control spirits, which are often used for the benefit of individuals, particularly for purposes of healing, both therapeutic and prophylactic, and their activities are also characterized by frenzy. The only important element missing is possession. If we endorse Eli-ade’s argument that spirit possession is not essential in shamanism, we could argue that sesupmus can also be considered ‘quasi-shamans.’ Then, it becomes perfectly understandable why the general Korean public call them both by the same name, mudang.

I, therefore, support the third view that Korean musok is a type of shamanism. Whilst agreeing that any spiritual specialist should not indiscriminately be called a ‘shaman.’ I consider the extreme reluctance to use the term, even when one should do so, a “constipated attitude,” as Lewis (1984) rightly points out. Shamanism is a term adoptea by English to refer to a certain socio-religious phenomenon, which happened to be first spotted among the Tungus in the late seventeenth/eighteenth century, although it had existed for a long time prior to that. A similar phenomenon, mutatis mutandis, can be found not only in Siberia, but also in such culturally diverse areas as North America, Mexico, South America, Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia, and east and north Asia (Drury, 1989). Thus the term ‘shamanism’ no longer refers only to the religious phenomenon of the Tungus and other Siberian tribes. The fact that the functions and the contents of the kuts, performed by both types, are identical, and sesupmus “act out” the voices of the spirits or the sentiments of the dead souls, and sometimes simulate kangshinmu’s magical acts, suoports the view that even the southern variety is a form of shamanism, although it may be said to be a relatively later development. What seems to confirm this view further is the fact that with the abolishment of the rigid social stratification, sesupmus have been fast disappearing, particularly in the southern counties. Today the god-descended shamans overwhelmingly outnumber hereditary ones (Hwang, 1988), whose number once exceeded that of the former nationwide (Akiba, 1950), signifying that without the artificial social constraint, Korean musok is reverting to its original form.

THE VARIETY AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE KUT

The kut is a comprehensive shamanistic ritual in which mudangs invite the spirits by entering into ecstasy, (in the case of sesupmus, by means of frenzied dance and music or borrowing the body and mouth of a member of the audience with psychic powers), and through entertaining them propitiate [page 12] spirits with unresolved grudges, or han, which are believed to be the cause of misfortune and illnesses, send off the dead to the other world, or merely seek the health, happiness and prosperity of a village or of an individual family.

Unlike many Korean words, kut does not have an equivalent Chinese character. Yi (1927) interprets kut as based on a pure Korean word, kutta, which means “nasty, foul or unfortunate,” as in kujun-nal (a rainy day), or kujun-nal (a nasty affair, i.e. a bereavement). Thus a kut is concerned with resolving the problems of misfortune, particularly illness and death. That is why kut is also sometimes called puri (solving or ‘dispelling’). Ramstedt (1949) traces the origin of kut to the Tungustic kutu, the Mongolian qutug, and the Turkish qut, which all mean “happiness” or “good fortune.” Thus the purpose of a kut is to bring about happiness and good fortune. Combining Yi’s and Ramstedt’s interpretations, a kut is a ritual which aims to dispel unexpected disasters and bring about good fortune.

The kut is inseparable from the mudang, since depending on the officiat- ing mudang, the form of the kut can also change. In the central and northern variety, the mudang (i.e. the shaman) not only evokes the spirits, but also gets possessed by them. Therefore, their costumes and paraphernalia tend to be more elaborate, since the shamans incarnate the descending spirits with them. They also perform magical acts, such as standing barefoot on sharp blades, and carrying a huge bucket filled with water with their lower lips, which get stuck to the rim of the bucket, standing a whole carcass of a pig on a trident, etc. These are supposed to be the signs of the powers of the possessing spirits.

The hereditary mudangs perform the same function, i.e. masterminding rituals and getting in touch with the spirits. They have highly developed dancing and singing skills, by which means they evoke the spirits and entertain them. Although possession never occurs, they act out the speech and the actions of the dead spirits. Apart from the absence of kongsu, or speaking in tongues, the contents, structure, and function of the kuts performed by both types of mudangs are fundamentally identical.

A kut basically consists of twelve koris, each kori being a small independent kut dedicated to a specific spirit. Twelve does not always represent the exact number of parts inside a kut, but a number symbolizing “a whole” or “completeness,” as twelve months complete a year (Yu, 1975). The contents and the number or Koris can vary slightly according to the officiating mudang, but the basic structure of the kut, i.e. 1) the evocation 2) entertainment, and 3) finally, the sending off of the spirits, remain unchanged.

The kuts can be broadly classified into four kinds; 1) the kut, performed for the dead, called chinogi-kut (Seoul and Kyonggido), ssikkim-kut (Cholla [page 13] and Ch’ungch’ong provinces), ogu-kut (the East Coast), Shiwangmaji (Cheju- do), etc. 2) the healing kut, called pyong-kut, uhwan-kut, michin-kut, etc. 3) the kut performed for the mudangs, i.e. the initiation kut, called naerim-kut or shin-kut, and the offerings to the shaman’s tutelary spirits, called chinjok-kut or haraboji-kut or haraboji-kut (Grandfather kut) 4) and the kut to pray for good fortune, which can be sub-divided into a) the private kut, and b) the community kut. The most commonly performed private kuts are called chae- su-kut (good luck kut), but also include toshin-kut, cholgi-kut (season kut), sonjumaji-kut (for the housesite spirit at the construction of a new house), honin-yetam-kut (pre-wedding kut), etc. The community kuts are performed every two to nine years to offer sacrifices to the village tutelary spirits, who are believed to bring good fortune, health, and prosperity to all the inhabitants. The names vary regionally, from taedong-kut, pydlshin-kut, pugunje, todang-kut, sonang-kut, tangsan-kut, ydngdong-lcut, to name but a few. These kuts are performed on a grand scale, involving and sponsored by everybody in the village, and sometimes neithbouring villages, creating an atmosphere of great festivity, as well as consolidating unity and solidarity among the villagers. They reflect the quintessence of Korean ‘culture’ and national identity, being a residue of the national scale shamanistic festivals of earlier ages. This is the very reason why the colonial Japanese government tried to eradicate all forms of kuts, under the pretext of superstition, particularly those performed en masse (Cho, 1990, etc.).

THE KOREAN SHAMANISTIC PANTHEON

Innumerable gods and spirits occupy the Korean shamanistic pantheon, which is reflected in a polite term of address for a shamaness, manshin, meaning literally “ten thousand spirits.” It implies that a competent shaman is capable of controlling all the spirits, which number “ten thousand,” a number often used in the sense of “countless” in Korean. It is, therefore, impossible to discuss them in such a short space of time, so I shall present the ten most popular spirits. In Korean, the distinction between singular and plural is sometimes blurred, so a group of more than one spirit is considered as one, for example, Chilsongshin (Seven Stars Spirit), although there are seven figures, is treated as one.

1. Heavenly God/Lord (Chonshin): is depicted as a white haired man, often wearing a crown, and controls life. [page 14]

2. Mountain Spirit (Sanshin): is shown as an old man always accompanied by a tiger He is responsible for procuring descendants, national security, and rain.

3. Seven Stars Spirit (Chilsong-shin): has been derived from the Big Dipper, or Ursa Major, and gives long life and general good fortune, including easier childbirth, healthier babyhood, wealth, prosperity, and virility.

4. The Dragon King (Yongwang): is depicted as an old man is royal robes and a crown, seen with a dragon, and is in control of the storms at sea and the rain.

5. Five-directional General (Obang-shinjang): is responsible for the changes in one’s life,usually for the better. When the shaman is possessed by this spirit, she carries five differently-coloured flags, which represent: 1) white-heaven 2) red-Mountain Spirit 3) blue-generals 4) yellow-ancestors 5) green-originally black, but since traditionally Koreans do not like black, has been replaced with green-sundry ghosts. She asks the sponsor to pick a flag, after rolling all five up together. White and red ones are supposed to be lucky, whereas a green flag signals trouble, and the sponsor is often asked to pick again. Blue and yellow ones seem to be indifferent.

6. Three Buddhas (Sambul, or Sambul-chesok): are shown as triplets wearing Buddhist monk’s costumes of peaked white hats and grey robes. They are deities of birth and fertility, as well as good luck.

7. Abandoned Princess (Pari-kongju): The Ballad of Princess Pari, the abandoned seventh daughter of a king, who eventually revives her already- dead parents, is recited at a mortuary kut. A personification of filial piety, one of the most important virtues in traditional Korean society, she is an ideal deity to guide the dead parent to the other world.

8. High Government Official (Taegam): is a bringer of luck, in exchange for wine, food, and money which he especially likes. The shaman demands a lot of money while playing this spirit, wearing ten thousand won notes stuck on her/his brow, and around the hat strings. Taegam-nori (“playing” Taegam) is often a part very entertaining for the shaman and the other participants of the kut, since it includes cheerful banter, catchy songs and dance.

9. A group of deified tragic kings (Pyolsang): are ironically responsible for welfare and good luck.

10. A group of deified war heroes (Kunung): which include foreign (mainly Chinese), and Korean generals, are believed to help drive away the evil spirits, which cause disease and misfortune. [page 15]

**BRIEF HISTORY OF KOREAN SHAMANISM**

Many Korean scholars who study shamanism trace its beginning to the famous and ancient myth of origin, known as the Tangun Myth. According to it, Hwanung, an illegitimate son of Hwanin, the Heavenly Lord, came down to Taebaek Mountain through a sacred tree, bearing the Three Heavenly Seals. At that time, there lived a bear and a tiger, who prayed to him to transform them into humans, They were ordered to eat only some sacred mug wort and garlic, and not to see light for 100 days. Both tried, but the tiger could not endure the ordeal, while the bear succeeded in becoming a woman after 21 days. The bear woman eventually became Hwanung’,s ‘wife’ and gave birth to a son, named Tangun, who founded the first Korean nation in 2333 B.C. He eventually became the Mountain Spirit at 1,908 years of age.

This myth, which is known to all Koreans, contains many elements which are also found in Siberian shamanism. First of all, the name Tangun is reminiscent of tengri of the Mongols, tengeri of the Buryat, tangere of the Volga Tartars, tingir of the Beltirs, tangara of the Yakut, etc., which all mean “sky” or “heaven.” The tree, as the cosmic axis which links heaven and earth, is a common concept in many Siberian tribes.

The transformation of the bear into a woman is effected only after a prescribed term of eating ritual food, and avoiding light which symbolizes life. In other words, the bear’s ordeal is similar to a Siberian shaman’s initiation experience of symbolic death and resurrection. It is interesting to note that mugwort is also considered sacred by other tribes of the world, for example, the Chumash call it the “dream herb” and use it as a hallucinogen (Drury, 1989). In Korea, even today, mugwort rice cake forms an indispensable part of the food offered to the spirits.

The union of gods and earthly women and the zoomorphic character of the shaman’s guardian spirits originating from totemism, are also common themes in Siberian shamanism. The Evenki shaman’s cult of the bear, which, according to Anisimov (1958, cited in Basilov, in Hoppal, ed, 1984) originates from a totemic source, is an interesting co-incidence. Also among the Yakut, an animal mother is considered the most important (Hultkrantz in Hoppal, ed., 1978). A remarkable parallel can be found in the existence of a zoomorphic guardian spirit in the form of a bear-mother in the Tangun myth. Hultkrantz (1978, ibid) claims that “shamanism cannot be spoken of without the belief in helping spirits and the ecstatic who attains the other world without the help of his guardian spirits is certainly no shaman.” Tangun with his powerful bear- mother as his guardian spirit can be said to be an archetypal shaman. [page 16]

The Tangun Myth first appeared in Samgukyusa (The Anecdotal History of the Three Kingdoms), compiled by the Monk Iryon in the late thirteenth century, when the then Koryo Kingdom was under Mongolian rule. It was a period of national submission and humiliation; the kings were forced to marry Mongolian princesses, and their culture, with its distinctive costumes and hairstyles, was avidly adopted by the fashionable elites. The Tangun Myth was a sort of invention of tradition by Iryon, based on the orally transmitted ancient myth, to boost the national morale and instill a sense of national identity and nationalism in times of national crisis. Since then the Koreans have prided themselves as the chosen people who have a divine origin, and their country a holy place specially chosen by God for his own son. Thus Koreans often proudly refer to themselves as “we,the descendants.” For centuries the Tangun Myth, in which the central figure may well have been a shaman king, has provided the Korean people with the rationale for national identity ana its sustainment.

There has been a theory among some Korean Historians that Tangun was a historical figure; the North Koreans have recently claimed that they have actually found Tangun’s bones. Tangun, whether he existed historically or not, plays a significant role in Korean shamanism, as one of the most popular tutelary spirits of the shamans. His picture invariably decorates the shaman’s private shrine, together with a Korean flag and often with a vase of pink artificial hibiscus, the Korean national flower. In the tenth month of the lunar calendar, when he is supposed to have come down to earth, a sacrificial offering is made by shamans on mountains everywhere, one of the main sites being Mai-san in Kanghwado.

Apart from the Tangun myth, various historical documents contain evidence that shamans were mostly men, who had political and jural, as well as ritual, power. For example, the second king of the Shilla Kingdom was called Namhae Ch’ach’aung (4-23 A.D), and according to Dr. Ross King of the SOAS, ch’ach’ aung are the Chinese characters used to transcribe a pure Korean word, susung, meaning “teacher,” but in the Hamgyongdo area a male shaman was also called susung (Akamatsu & Akiba, 1938).

Another piece of evidence that the early Korean kings may have fulfilled the shamanistic role is the royal regalia, excavated inside the royal tomb in Kyongju, the capital of Shilla (Yu, 1975; Grayson, 1989, etc.). The regalia, which consists of a gold crown, a gold belt, and shoes, bear a remarkable resemblance to the modern Siberian shaman’s costume. The crowns have wings, made of beaten gold in the shape of feathers, which also decorate the Siberian shaman’s headgear; the claw-shaped jade pieces, which hang from [page 17] the crown and the belt, are reminiscent of the bear or tiger claws, with which they decorate their clothing in the belief that they may obtain the power of those animals. The royal tomb, in which a set of these regalia was found, called Chonmach’ong (the Tomb of the Heavenly Horse; 4th-5th century A.D.) also contains a mural of a flying horse painted on birchbark. It is another piece of evidence to suggest that the early Shilla kings, before the adoption of Buddhism as the national religion, may have been shamanistic rulers, since the cosmic tree in the form of a white birch, and magical flights to heaven are classic concepts in Siberian shamanism.

The degeneration of shamanism from the central cult to a marginal cult is generally believed to have begun with the introduction of Buddhism from China in the fourth century A.D (Yu, 1975; Kim, 1987). However, although Buddhism was adopted officially as the central morality religion, extensive syncretism of Buddhism with shamanism meant that shamanism survived alongside it.

A full-scale persecution of shamanism began with the adoption of Confucianism by the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910) as the national guiding ideology. The mudangs of all descriptions were cast into the lowest of the low social class, from which there was no escape. Moreover, special taxes were levied heavily on all mudangs to discourage their practices (Yi, 1927). However, shamanism continued to thrive among the down-trodden mass belonging to the lower strata of society and women of all classes, providing cathartic release from oppressive patriarchy and social hierarchy.

Under Japanese colonial rule, shamanism was practised in defiance of the government ban, as a way of expressing cultural nationalism (Robinson, 1988). After liberation, successive governments’ movements for Korea’s modernization, particularly during President Park Chong-hi’s Third (1961- 1972) and Fourth (1972-1979) Republics, meant a further setback for shamanism. By 1968, the year I left Korea, kut was rarely performed in the centre of Seoul, at least not in public places, which accounts for my then scanty knowledge of it.

During my long absence, towards the end of President Park’s Third Republic, a revival of the traditional cultural movement was effected; The Spirit Worshippers’ Association for Victory Over Communism was officially formed in 1971 by Mr. Choi Nam-ok. However, ironically kut performances were banned at private homes because of the noise, and confined only to designated places. As part of The New Village Movement which included the abolition of superstitions, many shamanistic village shrines were destroyed While many religious leaders, mostly Buddhists and Christians enjoyed [page 18] powerful political connections, shamans continued to survive on the periphery of Korean society.

During the Fifth Republic (1980-1987, 8), the government’s main concern was with security and stability, and was particularly obsessed with globalism, which culminated in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, hence its motto, “Korea in the World.”

KOREAN SHAMANISM AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

I returned to Korea in May, 1987. With rapid modernization and industrialization, traditional Korean culture was fast disappearing, particularly in large cities, where American culture, symbolized by hamburgers and Coca- Cola, dominated. In Seoul in particular,with wide roads and ubiquitous Mac- Donald’s, Wendy’s, and Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants, it was sometimes difficult to know where one was exactly. Against this background, Korean shamanism, which had been deprecated and persecuted as tangible evidence of Korea’s backwardness, was enjoying a revival as ‘‘something uniquely Korean .”

Anthropologists studying rapidly modernizing, or more specifically westernizing societies, have often remarked on the revival of ancient or traditional rituals or customs by the people, including sometimes the sophisticated elites of the society, as a way of asserting their national identity and expressing their nationalistic feelings (Bloch, 1984; Smith, 1981; Lan, 1985).

Ecstatic cults, in various forms, have suffered gravely by the introduction of Christianity, which deprecates them as “demonic,” as testified by numerous missionaries’ accounts (Bishop, 1898). During the colonial periods, they remained largely in the ‘primitive’ backwaters of the society, kept alive by the ‘ignorant’ rural community. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, among the Xezuru in Southern Rhodesia, the ZANLA were legitimized as the returning ancestors by traditional spirit mediums, by observing the ritual rules set out by them (Lan, 1985) In a less deliberate and self-conscious way, among the Kaffa of south-western Ethiopia, the ego (spirit) cult serves as a vehicle for Kaffa cultural nationalism (Lewis, 1971).

Likewise in Korea, shamanism, which has never ceased to play an important part in the peoples’lives despite a long history of severe persecution, is being reappraised as a uniquely Korean religion-cultural heritage. Prof. Kim Tae-gon (1972) goes as far as to maintain that shamanism is “the source of the Korean people’s spiritual energy.” I would argue that this [page 19] renewed interest in hitherto disgraced shamanism is directly linked to the revival of the national identity, which has always been strongly present throughout Korea’s long turbulent history, and cultural nationalism. There is a sense in which Korean shamanism is revived as a protest and protection against cultural ‘colonialism’ by the West, particularly America, and a reaction against pan-global cultural homogenization.

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