[page 41]

**Rationality, practicality and Modernity: Buddhism, Shamanism and Christianity in Contemporary Korean Society**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the relationship between Buddhism, shamanism and Christianity in contemporary Korean society within the context of the religious practice pattern of modern Korean people. These religions and religious belief system play important roles in the religious lives of the Korean people today. Buddhism owes its survival and growth in popularity to its inherent rationality. On the other hand, Korean shamanism, generally referred to as musok, addresses the basic human desire for health, good fortune and long life, which is fundamentally irrelevant in Buddhism. The increasing power and popularity of Christianity is in a sense based on its association with modernity. Although the co-existence of Buddhism, Shamanism and Christianity in contemporary Korean society is not without conflict, there exists and intricate interplay between the three.

As Weber (1922) posits, Buddhism is the most rational of all world religions, since it logically explains unjustified human suffering. However, its lofty goal of achieving impossible nirvana is beyond reach for most mortals. Therefore, shamanism, or other similar indigenous possession cults, has often wielded influence on buddhism, in other parts of the world. (Obeysekere, 1963, 1968; Tambiah, 1970; Spiro, 1967) When the central morality religion [page 42] of a nation is Buddhism, these cults have co-existed alongside Buddhism to satisfy the needs of ordinary people, who cannot realisticaly attain nirvana. In such cases, ‘orthodox’ Buddhism has been compared to the great tradition while popular Buddhism as practised by the mass, and often containing shamanistic elements has been conpersel, to the little tradition in Redfield’s sense. (Obeysekere, 1963) Thus the relationship between Buddhism and shamanism is usually hierarchical, with the former having supremacy over the latter, as Spiro (1967) has shown in the case of Burmese Buddhism and super- naturalism.

“Shamanism and Buddhism are like two grafted trees. You can’t tell them apart,” said one of my informants to me during my fieldwork. This view was echoed repeatedly by many other shamans and their followers. Her remarks succinctly sum up the extent of the syncretism between shamanism and Buddhism in Korean socirety over the ages. However, during my fieldwork, I came across may Buddhists, monks and laymen alike, who would not admit to the influence of shamanism on their religion. Nevertheless, there is much evidence to suggest that Korean Buddhism has undergone a considerable metamorphosis as a result of the influence of shamanism. This bears witness to te fact that the relationship between the two is hierarchical, with Buddhism occupying a superior position over shamanism. This vertical relationship has always been present since the introduction of Buddhism into Korea in the fourth century.

In contemporary Korea, the situation is more complex, since there is a multiplicity of religious practices. Buddhism, which ceased to be the central morality religion six centuries ago, has since undergone a series of crises, and its survival has often been threatened.

The existing statistics reveal that modern Korean people most frequently cite Christianity and Buddhism as their religions. Confucianism is only infrequently cited as a religion they practise, and shamanism does not get a mention at all. The general pattern has been undergoing a change in favour of Christianity in recent years (Conggyo yon’gam, 1993), which suggests the existence of a competition between the two great world religions. I will argue that this phenomenon has increased the hostility that Buddhism has displayed towards shamanism for a long period of time.

The data that I use to support my argument was collected during my fieldwork conducted among Korean shamans during 1993-1994.

[page 43]

THEODICY, BUDDHISM AND LAY SOTERIOLOGY

As Weber maintains (1948), Buddhism successfully resolves the problem of theodicy, or God’s justification for the suffering of the innocent, which arises in monotheistic world religions. In monotheistic religions, the resolution of a theodiicy could never be logical, for at the heart of it there exists a fundamental logical contradiction; an omniscient, omnipotent, wholly benevolent God could not in logic permit suffering of the innocent and good. (Obeysekere, 1968:9). Buddhism provides a perfect solution to this problem through the Indian concept of karma (op in Korean) the belief in the transgression of souls. So guilt and merit in this world is compensated unfailingly in the successive reincarnations of the souls. Man is doomed to the eternal cycle of births and rebirths, or samsara, (yunhoe in Korean), which is defined as suffering. Suffering in the Buddhist sense has a wider philosophical implication of impermanence than just the simple pain; all karma-produced actions are aspects of suffering in a philosophical sense. Hence salvation, the elimination of suffering, must entail the elimination of karma so that the flow of continuit can be arrested. This is nirvana, i.e. salvation, the final release from samsara and suffering.

In most world religions, salvation is the reward for a meritorious life; if you do good in this world you go to heaven in the other world after death, in Buddhism, however, even Heaven, Paradise in an earthly sense, called kungnak, is a form of suffering because of its transience. Thus not only the person who commits bad karma, but also the person who does good, has little chance of achieving salvation, i.e. nirvana, since everybody continues to be reincarnated Salvation is only possible for the individual who rises above samsara altogether by renouncing society and the world, i.e. by becoming a monk and observing 227 precepts prescribed for monks. In theory even a layman could attain nirvana, but in practice it is impossible for most people, since the conditions of any human social order are such that attachments and desire are inevitable. Hence strictly speaking, Buddhism in its orthodox principle can be said to be a religion of ascetic monks in their monastic seclusion.

As Weber (1922) maintains, however, ordinary men turn to religion ‘so that they may prosper and have a long life on earth’. The inadequate provisions for the laymen to achieve salvation in orthodox Buddhist doctrines account for the development of a peasant or little tradition of buddhism under pressure of mass needs. In South East Asian countries, where Theravada Buddhism dominates, syncretism with shamanism or other forms of indigenous archaic religions has occurred, partly because the orthodox or great tradition was not interested in lay soteriology. Therefore the ‘heretical’ activities car- [page 44] ried out by the masses throughout Southeast Asia are based on perfect rationality. Since thelay masses, because of their involvement in the social system, are incapable of achieving salvation anyway, doctrinally heretical practices such as indigenous deity propitiation or astrology make little difference to their ultimate future prospects. Therefore, they might as well improve their lot in this life and next lives by whatever means available to them. From the sociological, particularly functionalist, point of view, then the forms of secular Buddhism practised in Southeast Asia, though they involve theological ‘heresy’, can be regarded as the successful transformation of essentially unsocialble Buddhism into a social religion.

SYNCRETISM OF BUDDHISM AND SHAMANISM IN KOREA

Buddhism was first introduced to Korea from China, in the fourth century and after some initial resistance, quickly established itself as the national religion. The type of Buddhism that reached Korea was Mahayana Buddhism, prevalent in North Asia. Mahayana in Korean is ‘taesung’ which literally means ‘big transportation’. The objective of Mahayana Buddhism is thus helping a great number of people to achieve salvation. In contrast, Theravada Buddhism is referred to as ‘sosung pulgyo’, or ‘little transportation’, in the sense that only the chosen few, i.e. ascetic monks, can attain nirvana.

For the ‘big transportation’, the doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism was radically modified so as to allow for the development of the Bodhisattva cult. Bodhisattvas are saviors who have postponed their own salvation in order to save others, although they have achieved enlightenment. In Mahayana countries, this doctrinal change has now become fully ‘orthodox’. (Obeysekere, 1968) Thus although the fundamental Buddhist doctrine that salvation can only be achieved by one’s own effort and ascetic renunciation of the world remains the same, over time ‘orthodoxy’ itself has undergone changes and has diversifed into different sects. Therefore ‘orthodoxy’ in Buddhism is not an absolute, inflexible concept, and ‘heterodoxy’ can become ‘orthodox’, if it is generally accepted, approved, and established.

Mahayana Buddhism, with Bodhisattvas and other numerous saints for the laity to supplicate, confronted little conflict with shamanism, the ancient indigenous belief system of the Korean people. Its modified doctrine made it possible for Buddhism to absorb shamanistic elements. Over time, therefore, extensive syncretism of Buddhism and shamanism has taken place. Among Korean scholars there is a consensus the view that many state-sponsored Bud- [page 45] dhist rituals, such as p’algwanhoe and yondunghoe, of the Koryo period were in essence shamanistic rituals hiding behind a thin Buddhist veneer. (Yu, 1975:260)

The syncretism of Buddhism and shamanism, however, has always been a vertical alliance. Buddhism was the officially recognized central morality religion until the 14th cintury, while shamanistic elements were always held in contempt, castigated, disregarded, or at best hidden. There remain numerous historical documents recording the official condemnation of shamans and their practices.1 On the other hand, there is much evidence to suggest that the pride of place was given to Buddhist gods in shamanistic rituals. What illustrates this point very well is a poem entitled ‘The Old Shamaness’, which appears in Tongguk Isangguk chip written in around 1241 by Yi Kyubo, a high-ranking government minister. The poem was written to commemorate the expulsion his neighbour, an old shamaness, from the capital. It vividly describes the shamanistic practices in 13th century Korea, which reflect many Buddhist elements. Let us briefly examine lines 26-28:

“Her rafted shrine measures barely five feet high.

Yet she claims the Heavenly Buddha Emperor is there.

The Buddha Emperor properly resides in the Six Heavens.

How could He stay in your humble abode?”

The concept of the Six Heavens and the Buddha residing there itself is a deviation from the fundamental Buddhist doctrine. Despite the minister’s derision of the absurdity of the shamaness’s practice, his own idea can be said to have been influenced by the indigenour Korean belief in Heaven, which was deeply rooted in shamainism.2

Today, even a casual observer of the Korean shamanistic ritual called, kut, would immediately notice the extent of the Buddhist influence on Korean shamanism. The shamanistic shrines, both private and commercial, are, with few exceptions, filled with Buddhist artefacts, such as Buddha statues, wooden gongs and beads, Buddhist-style paintings and other paraphernalia. The costumes and some ritual procedures also reflect its influence. The shamanistic costumes for many higher-status spirits are derived from the Buddhist concept, and when the Buddhist-derived spirits descend on the scene, the animal carcass offerings are covered with a piece of white paper, in observance of the Buddhist prohibition of killing. Moreover shamans often recite the Buddhist scriptures, believing that they possess pwers to chase away evil spirits.3

Some of the most important shamanistic spirits, such as Chesok (the Buddha Emperor), Pulsa (the Buddhist Guru Grandmother), Sambul (the Three [page 46] Buddhas), Shiwang(the Ten King of the Netherworld)are derived from Buddhism. What is interesting is the fact that these spirits are accorded the highest ranks in the pantheon, and therefore ‘entertained’ before the ‘purely’ shamanistic spirits, such as Ch’angbu (the Performer Spirit).

While the Buddhist influence is proudly displayed in most shamanistic practices, the shamanistic elements in Korean Buddhism are much more played down. A shrine dedicated to the shamanistic Holy Trinity, comprising the Seven Stars Spirit, the Mountain Spirit, and the Solitary Star Spirit, is usually found in all Buddhist temple grounds. However, what is interesting is the fact that these shrines are very small and insignificant in size and shape in comparison with the main temple buildings. Moreover, they are usually situated discreetly in an inconspicuous position.

Despite these outwardly low-key shamanistic elements, Korean Buddhism has undergone extensive syncretism with shamanism, particularly in terms of its ideology. (Yi Nunghwa, 1927; Akamatsu 7 Akiba, 1938; Yu, 1975; Ch’oe, 1978; Kim Inhoe, 1987) Let us briefly examine the reasons that the ordinary Koreans give for visiting Buddhist temples. They are:

1. to attend festivals, such as the Buddha’s Birthday

2. to perform mortuary rites, such as the 49th Day Ritual and 100th day Ritual to pray for the wellbeing of the dead

3. to pray for long life, prosperity and healing, and preventing other diseases and misfortune.

The above suggests Korean Buddhism is closer in ideology to shamanism, which is this-wordly, corporeal and existential. It also supports Yu’s view (1975:263) that Korean Buddhism can be said to be ‘Buddhism of prayer for good fortune’.

Although outwardly the influence of Buddhism on Korean shamanism has been greater that the latter on the former, in essence the opposite can be said to be true. As Kim Inhoe(1987:217)shrewdly observed, Buddhist paraphernalia merly serve as external decorations in Korean shamanism, while Korean Buddhism has undergone a metamorphosis to such an extent that Buddhism as practised by the Korean laymen can be said to be closer to shamanism than ‘orthodox’ Buddhism.

Among the regular sponsors of kut who practise a world religion, the Buddhists account for the largest proportion. Many of them switch from one the the another in the course of their lives, or alternatively, adapting to the situation, they tend to practise the two alongside each other.

Buddhist festivals bring the Buddhists and shamanists together. Prima facie, they are indistinguishable. However, after a few months in the field, I [page 47] learned to distinguish between them by the way they pray. I noticed that Buddhists seem to stand on one spot and bow several times with their hands held together, while the shamanists rub their hands together repeatedly and bow to all directions, turning 360 degrees in the process. The Buddhist monks and officials, who must also perceive their identity, theat all shamanists as though they were Buddhists.

It seemed to me that the Buddhist officials regard the shamanistic elements in their religion as highly undersirable and shameful, i will give an example from my field experience, pansangje, meaning “Liberating Life Ritual”, is a Buddhist festival performed on the 3 of March by the lunar calendar. A large crowd of mainly women gather by the riverside and performs the act of releasing fish or sometimes turtles into the river for merit-making on the third day of the third month by the lunar calendar. This same ritual is called yonggung kut (the Kragon Palace Ritual) by the shamans and their clients, according to my veteran shaman informants. My shaman friends, Yi Chong- nam, Chong Wonhae, and Pang Ch’unja told me about this kut to be per-formed on the 13 April, 1994 (3 March in the lunar calendar that year), at the Dragon Palace Shrine on a bank of the Han River, which flows through Seoul. When I got there, however, there were no signs of shamanistic activities; everybody I talked to denying vehemently that they had anything to do whatsoever with shamanism, which they said was merely a superstition. However, I could recognize some participants as shamanists by the way they prayed. I also saw prolific displays of shamanistic talismans in the buildings. It was later confirmed again by my shaman informants that pangsaengje and yonggung kut are indeed one and the same, only different terms are applied by the Buddhists and shamanists. The implications were that the Buddhists were ashamed of having any connections with shamanism, which they consider a ‘primitive superstition’.

Another visual evidence of the syncretism of shamanism and buddhism is a place of worship for the Buddhists and shamanists alike, called Sonpawi (Zen Rocks), a group of rocks shaped like monks wearing peaked hats. Situated on top of Mount Inwang in Seoul they attract large numbers of worshippers and other visitors. Oral tradition has it (Kim Yongsam, 1989:64) that the eminent Buddhist monk Muhak Taesa4, an advisor to the founder of Choson dynasty, King T’aejo, suggested that the Zen Rocks be included inside the city walls. On the other hand, a Confucian literati minister called, Chong Tojon, insisted that they be placed outside the walls. Eventually Chong won, which signified the symbolic triumph of Confucianism, and defeat and further decline of Buddhism and shamanism. These days, worshippers pray at the Zen [page 48] Rocks for sons, prosperity, and healing of bodies and minds. One can detect both Buddhists and shamanists judging from the way they bow in prayer, as described earlier.

I was fascinated, when Ms. Pang, one of the veteran shamans, told me that shamans climb up the steep hill to the Zen rocks on the eve of any kut to ‘inform the spirits of the planned rituals, however late it may be. The extreme reverence that shamans and their followers hold for this very Buddhist symbol may be interpreted in several ways, it illustrates the extensive syncretism between Buddhism and shamanism, and the supremacy of the former over the latter, it also suggests that after the fall from official grace, Buddhism, may from the 14th century have absorbed the shamanistic elements even further thus, coexisting alongside shamanism at the level of the downtrodden masses during the Choson dynasty. The extent of shamanistic elements in Korean buddhism deserves further anthropological research at the grassroots.

BUDDHISM AND SHAMANISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF MODERN KOREAN PEOPLE

At the beginning of this century, Homer Hulbert (1906), an early Christian missionary to Korea, wrote, ‘As a general thing, we may say that the all-round Korean will be a Confucianist when in is in trouble’. He argues that to know a man’s true religion you should see what he does when in trouble.

I have argued (1995) that Hulbert’s remarks are still valid in contemporary Korean society. What is interesting, however, is the fact that the existing statistics for modern Koreans’ religions reveal a completely different picture. The two most dominant religions by far are Buddhism and Christianity. According to the Ministry of Information statistics, in 1982, there were 11 million buddhists, and the Christians, combining Catholics and Protestants, numbered 9 million, the figures change in the Gallup Research statistics in 1984 to 7.4 million buddhists and 9 million christians. The 1985 census reveals a slightly different trend, with just over 8 million Buddhists to 8.34 million Christians.

The problem with these figures, however, lies in the method used, which was by self-identification. According to Yun (1988), in actual terms of religious practice, the figures should more realistically show 91% Confucianists, 49.3% Buddhists, and only 36.3% christians.

The statistics indicate that the emergence of Christianity as a more dominant religion is shown not only in quantitative terms, but also in qualitative [page 49] terms. According to Chonggyo yon’gam (1993), the Korean Buddhists suffer graver doubts about their faith than their Christian counterparts.

Why then do so many modern Koreans wish to project themselves as christians? I would argue that it is because Christianity is associated with modernity, industrialization, and advanced civilization imported from the West, while Buddhism is associated with anachronism and Korean’s past. (Kusan, 1985: 32-33)

The gradual increase in the number of Christians, sporadic incidents of fanatic christian arson of Buddhist templess, and the assertions of some Christians that Korea is now a Christian country, etc. all indicate that for many Koreans Christianity symbolizes Korea’s progess in the modern world.

Buddhism, which has always been a driving force in the Korean people’s philosophical consciousness despite the decline and suppression during the Confucian Choson dynasty regime, faces strong competition from powerful, albeit relatively newly-established, Christianity. In recent years, it seems to me that there have been efforts on the part of Buddhist organizations to revitalze the structure of Buddhism through mass appeal. Modernization processes include mass production and distribution of tape recordings of famous monks, mass media publicity on the occasion of the death of renowned monks, and popular appeal for donations for constructions of new Buddhist temples. The self-image that Korean Buddhism tries to project is well represented by a ubiquitous poster, representing a sect of Korean Buddhism. The poster features a buddhist monk with an affluent-looking middle-aged woman with gently-permed hair, wearing sophisticated casual western clothes and smiling con- tertedly. the image of this woman is a far cry from my own conception of a Buddhist believer, which is that of a saintly old man or a wizened long-suffer- ing woman of the countryside.

Against this background, for the Buddhists, any connection with shamanism, which is generally associated with ‘primitiveness’, can only be extremely embarrassing. This may well be the reason the buddhists when I met denied any connection with shamanism, and even showed anger at such a suggestion. I would argue that the competition between the two great world religions, Buddhism and shamanism, has contributed to the reinforcement of the hostility of Buddhism towards shamanism. Christianity, being closely associated with modernity in contemporary Korean society, condemns musok as a primitive superstition. Nevertheless, the Korean Christian churches, both Catholic and Protestant, also contain many shamanistic elements despite their persecution of musok. The detailed discussion of this fascinating subject is beyond the scope of this paper. I will just mention that I have come across some Chris-[page 50]tians, including one or two ministers, sponsoring kut for various reasons. Their views on musok were more in the perspective of cultural nationalism, than anything else. However, they would never state publicly that they had sponsored a kut.

CONCLUSION

Akiba, a japanese social anthropologist, conducted fieldwork among the Korean shamans in the 1930s. One of Akiba’s shaman informants (1938:312) explained to him that Buddhism was like the great house, and shamanism like the little house. It is intriguing to hear that an uneducated Korean shaman actually preempted Redfield in his theory of the great and little traditions by more than 20 years.

The existence of Bodhisattva and other saints in Mahayana Buddhism, the type practised in Korea, has made it easy to incorporate many elements of shamanism, the anceint indigenous religion of the Korean people. Their relationship, however, has been always vertical, with buddhism having supremacy over shamanism. I have discussed how the Buddhist influence on shamanism is blatantly displayed, while the shamanistic elements in Korean Buddhism are underplayed as much as possible. That suggests that shamanism is proud to be associated with buddhism, whereas the latter is ashamed of its connection with the former.

The religious scene in contemporary Korean society has recently undergone great changes. Christianity, after suffering a period of gory persecution, has been firmly established as the religion of 20% of the total population, and accounts for 48.6% of the religions Korean people practise these days. Moreover, there has been a steady increase in the Christian population. Christianity is associated with modetnity, and is seen as the symbol of the newly-industrialized nation-state.

Buddhism, in the face of the increased competition from Christianity, has also made efforts to modernize its practices with media publicity, utilization of modetrn equipment in Buddhist temples and the encouragement of mass participation in the construction of new Budhist temples, etc.

Against this background, any association with shamanism has become an even bigger embarrassment to the Buddhist authorities. The competition between these two great world religions has further forced Buddhists to deny any close link with shamanism, which has existed for centuries. In times of unexplained great disaster and/or anxiety, however, many Korean people, [page 51] including Buddhists and some Christians, turn to musok. There are only a few adult female Koreans who have never consulted a fortune-teller. Many fortune-tellers are actually kut-performing mudang, althouth of course many practise statistics-based yokhak. In the current so-called ‘IMF Age’, when the Korean economy has suffered a severe setback, and the unemployment situation has become grave, the number of people visiting mudang has increased, according to my shaman informants. Fewer kut are being sponsored, however, on account of the lack of, and people’s reluctance to part with, ready cash, which clearly reflects the practicality of musok.

Even those who deprecate musok, cannot seem entirely to eliminate shamanistic elements in their religious lives. The manners in which Korean worshippers pray to various spiritual beings, such as Buddhist Bodhisattvas and Christian saints, to alleviate their immediate physical and mental sufferings is in essence tantamount to the shamanists supplicating various spirits. I would go as far as to say that the modern Korean praxis of Buddhism and Christianity are in principle underpinned by their indigenous belief system, i.e. musok or Korean shamanism.

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NOTES

1. For details, see Yi Nunghwa 1927.

2. See Hogarth, 1992 & 1995.

3. For details of the shamanistic incantations based on the Buddhist Scriptures, see Akamatsu & Akiba, 1938, Book II, pp 239-246. An interesting parallel can be found in northern Thailand, where the people also believe in the powers of the Buddhist Scriptures, (Tambiah, 1970)

4. Even today Muhak Taesa appears in the Shamanistic ritual in the Seoul area as a revered deity.

5. There were some serious incidents of arson of Buddhist temples in Seoul in April 1996, causing millions of pounds of damage. Fanatic Christians were suspected of the crime, although there was inadequate evidence.