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Mythology, Ritual and Female Empowerment

A Comparative Study of Shamanism in Korea and Japan

Topic and Research Question

Korea and Japan both have a long tradition of shamans being known for their various extraordinary powers and skills. Among the broad range of phenomena associated with shamanism, my MA thesis focuses mainly on female shamans, their origin and their social functions in Japan and Korea.

The following research questions are dealt with:

- Why can we speak of a dominance of women in Korean and Japanese shamanism?
- What does this dominance mean for the general nature of shamanism in these countries?
- What are the differences between female shamans in Korea and Japan?

State of the Art

Substantial research on shamanism started in the mid-20th century, a defining work being *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* by the Romanian religious historian, Mircea Eliade, (first published in 1951). Eliade's definition of the shaman as a traveller through the other world by means of trance was very influential and is still referenced to this day. It was, however, also criticized by other authors such as Ioan Lewis, who stressed the importance of spirit possession in the context of shamanism in his book *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (1989). Shamanism in Japan has been researched by scholars such as Ichirō Hori (1968) and Carmen Blacker (1983, 1999, 2004). Blacker's *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (first published in 1975) remains one of the most comprehensive works on the subject in the West. Shamanism in Korea has been extensively researched amongst others by Tae-gon Kim (1998a, 1998b), who is considered an expert in this field, and Hyun-key Kim Hogarth (1998, 1999, 2002).

Methodology and Approach

My research is primarily based on secondary literature concerning shamanism in general as well as the historical background and the social functions of shamans in Korea and Japan.

Since the concept of shamanism is very abstract and the term is often hard to distinguish from other religious

authorities or priests in archaic societies, the fundamental step was to find a general working definition.

In my thesis, I define shamans as magico-religious specialists who serve as an intermediary between the human and the supernatural world in order to help their clients or communities. To do so shamans use techniques of trance to communicate with spirits or deities while either letting their own body being possessed by a spirit, or by inducing the spirit into someone else.

To achieve a comparative analysis, three subfields within each culture were selected: mythology; the training of a (female) shaman; and (female) shamans in modern society. Among these fields comparable phenomena were singled out, analyzed in detail and compared to each other in the concluding chapter.

Main Facts

Shamanistic phenomena in Korea as well as in Japan go back to ancient times and traces of them can be detected in the founding myths of both countries. In Korea, shamanism is called *musok*, shamans are known as *mudang*. They are mostly female and can be divided into those receiving a supernatural calling followed by experiencing an initiation sickness, and those obtaining the call by inheritance. The fact that not all experience trance, conflicts with the traditional definition of Eliade's shamanism and has led to a dispute whether Korean shamanism is an indigenous phenomenon or may be traced back to the classical Siberian shamanism.

Japanese shamanism is not a specific tradition of its own, but has become a part of both Buddhism and Shintō. Similar to Korea, shamanism in Japan is the domain of women, being mostly practiced by *miko* (shrine maids) since the Middle Ages. The *miko* are complemented by male ascetics (*gyōja* or *yamabushi*) who practice healing rituals with supernatural powers acquired through ascetic practice and a symbolic journey to the otherworld. While these ascetics come closest to Eliade's definition, they are sometimes omitted in discussions about shamanism in Japan.

As mentioned above, the mythology of both countries contains traces of shamanism. Several Korean myths for example feature a medium as protagonist acting as a link between deities and human beings. These mediums are usually female, however when it comes to Dangun, the legendary founder of Korea, this rule finds its exception as Dangun is male. Nevertheless, he is seen as a prototype of shamans in Korea. A very similar tale exists

in the Japanese mythology about the descent of Ninigi, the grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu, who was sent down to secure the reign of their lineage on earth. While Dangun is explicitly regarded as the founder of shamanism in Korea, however, there is no such link to shamanism in the Ninigi story. The two most famous Japanese shamanistic tales are the female deity Ame no Uzume's dance in front of a rock cave to lure out Amaterasu, and the empress consort Jingū-kōgō delivering oracles.

With regards to the dominant role of women in shamanism in the respective countries, Lewis maintains that possession cults can be seen as a means of protest by the socially weak and ignored, like women in male dominated societies. He calls this phenomenon "peripheral cults". Wilson (1985) analyzed the social situation of female shamans in Korea and partly agrees with Lewis' theory, but also stresses that harsh living circumstances in general may be responsible for being susceptible to possession.

The phenomenon of a "peripheral cult" also applies to the main types of female shamans in Japan: the *itako*, an organized guild of blind female fortune tellers, and the *kamisama* who become a shaman after experiencing a personal encounter with a supernatural entity. The latter, however, are not necessarily blind. In Korea, *mudang* may be divided into two similar subcategories: *kangshinmu* (shamans via reception of a spirit) and *seseummu* (hereditary shamans). The rituals conducted by shamans in Japan and Korea are very similar as regards their social functions. These include the communication with dead relatives, exorcism, and the praying for worldly benefits such as physical and financial well-being.

Results

My research has shown that the shamanistic forms of Korea and Japan have various similarities, especially when it comes to female shamans and their functions. However, in some aspects, these countries have developed differently.

Already in their founding myths both countries show frequent shamanistic occurrences. In Korean myths, the origin of *musok* is an essential topic and is therefore acknowledged as a phenomenon of its own. This is also mirrored in a clear concept of shamanism within Korean society in the form of *musok*. By contrast, Japanese shamanism is splintered throughout the religious landscape. The relevant stories are all found in the chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, which were used to detail the

legendary origin of the country and the imperial lineage. The shamanistic elements therein are not the focus or end result of the respective myths. There is no explicit mention of something like "shamanism".

The parallels between the myths of Dangun and Ninigi, however, are certainly not incidental, since there are similar myths found in Siberia and China, which are certainly older.

All specialists agree on the predominance of shamanistic women in both countries but there are great differences regarding the reasons for this predominance. According to Kim and Hori, for instance, shamanism originated from an archaic matriarchy and the situation in both countries follows this pattern. On the other hand, various scholars argue that the manifestations of shamanism in East Asia all derive from Siberia, a patriarchal society, with regional deviations occurring due to specific cultural and historical developments. In addition, Barnes (2014) claims that an early Chinese cult may have been the reason why Japan's ancient female ruler Himiko (3. cent. CE) can be regarded as a shaman queen. Since Korea was influenced by China earlier than Japan, it is plausible that this cult may have played a role there too in establishing privileged relations between supernatural beings and women. In contrast to such historical arguments, Lewis and Wilson employ a functional explanation, regarding shamanism as a "peripheral cult" and as a tool to empower the socially weak, in this case women. Barger (1997) argued in a similar way regarding spirit possession in Heian Japan.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at>

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Examination Date: 19 October 2015