CONCERNING THE ORIGIN AND FORMATION OF KOREAN SHAMANISM

BY

JUNG YOUNG LEE

Grand Forks, N. Dak. U.S.A.

The origin of Korean shamanism is uncertain. Thus Eliade concludes, "It is difficult to determine the 'origin' of Korean shamanism." 1) This difficulty lies primarily in its complexity. The diversification of shamanistic practices according to different provinces makes it difficult to find the unifying source of its origin. A serious attempt was made at the end of the Yi Dynasty to unify the different systems of shamanism, but it did not succeed. 2) Perhaps the diversification of the religion is well summarized by Hulbert as a religion of the mosaic. 3) Moreover, according to Akamatsu, Korean shamanism is the most thoroughgoing synthesis of Taoism and Buddhism. 4) These two higher forms of religion became united with shamanism so intimately that it is almost impossible to separate them. We will see how much the contemporary form of shamanism is affected by these religions. Since it is almost impossible to trace the origin of shamanism, from the appearance of contemporary shamanism, it is best to approach it from a study of myths or legends which have something to do with its origin. We will select a few prominent and reliable ones, among many, and examine them as much as possible in their historical con-

2) The wife of the last king of the Yi Dynasty, Queen Min, a devout believer in shamanism, raised the cult to the highest place in her palace. She attempted to organize the cult of the whole nation under a centralized system by raising Yi Chi Yong to the rank of princess. When the Queen was murdered by the Japanese in 1895, all of this came to an end.
3) See Homer Hulbert, The Passing of Korea (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1906), Chapter XXX.
4) See Akamatsu Chijo and Akiba Tokashi Chusen Fuzuk no Kenkyu, Vol. II (Seoul, 1938), Chapter 12.
texts. However, before we analyze these myths or legends, let us first clarify our understanding of shamanism in Korea.

Korean shamanism in our times is almost exclusively identified with terms like Mutang and Pansoo. Pansoo, the male shaman, occupies an insignificant place in Korean shamanism, while Mutang, the female shaman or shamaness, occupies its mainstream. Therefore, Korean shamanism in general means the cult of Mutang. Before the Korean alphabet everything was written in Chinese. Therefore, the Chinese words “Mu” or “Mutang” have been applied to indicate shamanism. It is commonly believed that the word “Mu” alone was used to designate shamanism in early writings. Mu etymologically means “the one who performs miracles” or “the performance of miracles.” Therefore, Mu alone is sufficient to indicate the shamaness or the shaman as far as its usage is concerned. However, the word “Tang” was believed to be added to it later. Tang means an altar, which should not be confused with the word “Jyul” or “Sa,” which means the temple. We do not know exactly when the word “Tang” was added to the “Mu” in the development of Korean shamanism. However, from a historical point of view there is a Chinese document, San Hai Kyeng (about the first century A.D.), which had already mentioned the existence of the cult of Mu around the area of Mt. Paiktu (Mt. Whitehead), which is located on the northern tip of the Korean peninsula. It appears again in the earliest Korean document, Samkuk-Saki or the History of the Three Kingdoms, which was written in the twelfth century. During the Yi Dynasty we find that the use of Mutang, instead of Mu, becomes apparent. As we have already indicated, the Chinese characters for Mutang mean the altar or shrine of Mu or shaman. It is possible that the location of the shamanistic altar came to be identified with a shamaness herself.

---

5) It is not a good translation to say that Mu means “deceiving.” See Allen Clark's translation in his Religions of Old Korea (N.Y., Fleming H. Revell Co., 1932), pp. 183-4.


7) Ibid.

8) It appears in the narrative of King Ruri of Kokuryô: “When, in the ninth month of his nineteenth year’s reign, the King was ill, he called the priest “Mu” to find out the cause of his illness.” See Samkuk-Saki, Kokuryô Kingdom.