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Religion, myths and rituals in Korean women's world History, historiography and everyday practices

한국 여성들의 세계에서 의 종교, 신화, 그리고 의식
역사, 사료 및 일상적 수행에 대하여

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Introduction

This paper presents some of the main elements and results of the investigation I conducted for my Ph.D. dissertation about Korean women's religious experiences. The thesis I study is that religion, mythological stories, rituals, religious practices and daily devotions to the female figures have played a major role in creating and maintaining women's identities along the history of Korea and continues to do so at present. To achieve this objective, I investigate the peculiarities of the religion of Korean women, expressed in the specific forms of their feelings, lives, believes and practises. It is a religious experience that has had a historical evolution, and manifests itself in the myths, rituals and daily practices. It has been built on the religious practices of believers of the three main traditions that share currently the religious world of Korea, Shamanism, Buddhism and Christianity, as well as by the influence of Confucianism. These religions enable us to know the experience of Korean women from the perspective of various traditions, with an important influence on the history of Korea and, furthermore, we can compare the different elements from both eastern and western cultures. We will see Shamanism, which is an indigenous Korean religious tradition, Confucianism, from China, Buddhism, a religion originating in India that came across China and, finally, Christianity, a religion that has reached Korea more recently from the West.

I also look into the historical, cultural and religious characteristics that the Korean believers have given to their everyday practices related to female deities. Throughout the history these figures have had a very special meaning in the lives of thousands of women in the Asian continent. They have a very

deep symbolic meaning for Korean women and play an important role in their lives, especially on their daily lives and family life. They have had positive and negative influences on the position of women within the family and society; and have influenced the way women assume their role in society, their religion and their own family. In order to do this it is necessary first to know the historical development of these cults throughout the history of Shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity, and how they arrived and grew in Korean soil. It is very interesting to see the way their divine and female identity has evolved through the time. The three main deities studied here are: Barigongju (Shamanism), Gwanseeum Bosal (Buddhism), and the Virgin Mary (Christianity).

The final conclusions of the work try to answer at how the myths, rites and practices are influencing in the creation of Korean women identities nowadays.

Methodology

In this type of studies is very important to indicate the kind of methodology used to reach the results. In my research I have combined material from the theoretical study of historical documents and sources from qualitative research through field work, observing behaviours, interviews to informants, participation in the rites and cults; and sharing daily life with Korean women belonging to different religious traditions. This “historic–anthropological” double perspective allows us to transcend our own mindsets in order to understand the behaviour of others.

The religious experiences are a phenomenon that is mediated by historical, social, economic and political changes suffer by its members, who are the ones embodying a concrete religion. In addition, religion is understood and lived differently by different groups that make up society. I focus on the gender division of groups that has marked the religious experience of men and women in Korea. Each group selects the set of beliefs and practices of their religion which are more appropriate and better suited to their needs and situation in which they are living in each particular time.

I look on religion as experienced concretely by Korean women rather than the ideal model established by religious institutions, as is really practiced by the majority of them, as embodied in a particular culture, in concrete geographic boundaries and in a common history.

One of the elements more accentuated by the feminist researchers of religions is the fundamental importance of having as a starting point of such studies the specific experience of women. So far, the majority of religious traditions, the research and the written material have been dominated by men. The men are who have decided what to include in the Holy Scriptures and have been men who have interpreted it from their dominant position, creating rules and laws that reaffirmed their dominance within each of the religions and keeping women in their subordinate position. That is why it is absolutely necessary to make a

reinterpretation and re-reading of religious material and symbols from a non-dominant position and from a gender perspective.

Women in different societies are rethinking their position from a dynamic perspective of culture and their reality. They do that from a conception of identity as a historic construction that is forming and reformulating daily. These everyday experiences form gender identities and are putting the elements needed to formulate struggle strategies more in tune with their own cultural and living reality.

The field work done for this research took place from 1995 to 2007 mainly in the area of Gyeonggi-do in different guttang, mudang's houses, Buddhist temples and Catholic churches.

Contents

The work was divided in five parts. In the first part I work on the historiographic and historical foundations of the investigation, trying to put the bases looking at the main historiographical trends appeared in the last century in Korea, both North and South, and the studies on Korea publish in the West. It also deals with historical events that have marked the rising of different religious traditions in the Korean peninsula. This is followed by an analysis of the main founding myths of the various Korean kingdoms, with special attention to the myth of Dangun, considered the founder of the Korean people. Special emphasis is put on the female figures that appear in the different myths. After studying the myths I go through the major historical moments that have marked the construction of cultural and religious characteristics of Korean people from antiquity to the present day.

As a second step in the investigation I felt the need to introduce the world of Korean women from a historical perspective as well as their current situation. To do this it was necessary to focus also on their role within the family and the family model dominant in Korean traditional society and the current changes it is undergoing. In this part of the work is where Confucianism plays an essential role. The family has been the primary environment where the lives of Korean women has evolved for many centuries, for this reason, it begins by exploring how the family model has developed along the history of Korea, with particular emphasis on the introduction of Confucianism. Confucianism has been the thought that has the greatest influence on the construction of a concrete type of family that has had a decisive impact on the lives of women over the past centuries and even today. I inquire in the world of women within the traditional family and how it has transformed with the advent of modernity and Western influences.

The following two parts analyse the religious experience of Korean women in the three religious traditions that are the main focus of this study: Shamanism, Buddhism and Christianity.

The third part focuses on the Korean Shamanism. First it presents some of its general features and its historical evolution and then focus on the main figure of shamanism: the shaman or *mudang*. This analysis is aided by the concrete experience of the shaman and the testimony of women who practice Shamanism. It also explores the main shamanic deities and their rites, which are the core of their religious experience. The shamanism has been since ancient times the meeting place for Korean women, the practice where express their sufferings and yearnings.

In the next part, the fourth, I study two other religious traditions that have also had an important influence on the world of women: Buddhism and Christianity. Analyze the position and activity of women within them. Starting with how these two religions have interpreted the role of women throughout history, and then how these specific ways of seeing the woman has influenced the lives of Korean believers. I also do a brief journey through the history of these two traditions in Korea until now and see, finally, the position and activities of women within Buddhism and Catholicism in Korea today.

The fifth part presents three of the most representative female divinities of the three religious traditions studied in previous chapters: Shamanic Princess Bari, Buddhist Bodhisattva Gwanseeum and the Christian Holy Mother Mary. These female figures have played a major role in the religious experience of Korean women and in their everyday practices along history. Here I analyze the historical development of these divinities, how they came to Korea and how have transformed over time. To do so, I draw on oral and written sources.

In the case of Princess Bari we see her through the shaman's songs, their myths and rituals; and study her influence on the religious practices and daily life of women. With the Bodhisattva Gwaneum, I began from its origins in India and then consider its passage through China to reach Korea where she took a specific traits, determined by the Korean cultural reality. Through the historical evolution and the Buddhist Sacred Scriptures I discover the main images and symbolic meaning given to Gwaneum. Finally consider more specifically the process of "feminization" that the figure of Gwaneum suffered throughout this historic process and in the Buddhist scriptures, especially in East Asia. According to Buddhist teachings, bodhisattvas have not gender therefore Gwaneum could not be seen neither as a male nor a female divinity. However, at the beginning of the spread of Buddhism in India was represented with masculine traits, and then in China take female traits that will also continue when arriving in Korea. As for the figure of Mary, I also analyze the historical development of this divinity within the Catholic tradition, biblical texts and apocryphal scriptures. Especially look different images that have been given to Mary throughout history and in different cultural contexts, finally, also analyze the historical development of this devotion in Korea. Especially I look into the historical process of "deification" of Mary and how it has been interpreted her female gender along the history. I also see how this process of deification and

interpretation of her gender have influenced the position of women within the Korean church and society.

As conclusion of the work I concentrate on analysing the results encountered along the entire investigation, both the historical and anthropological study. What have been the influences of history, religion, stories, the female deities and practices on creating the everyday identities of Korean women. Draw some conclusions about the key cultural, social and religious features of the experience of Korean women. To do so I look into the experience and concrete testimony of Korean women, taking into account what they expressed in the interviews conducted during my fieldwork.

Some of the questions I try to answer are:

What is the actual experience of the Korean women believer in their religious practices? How women express their social and cultural reality through their relationship with the female divinities? What is the symbolic meaning that women give to these everyday practices? How they influence their lives?

Results of the research

Here are some of the main results found in the course of this investigation:

1. Through the work we saw the long historical processes that have shaped the religious experience of Korean women. How the religiosity, which moves away from the male patriarchal and rational ideas that dominate both religious and social institutions, had different consequences on the lives of Korean women believers. Such a religious experience, their rituals, their stories, their devotions and worship in most cases have been pushed towards the periphery and it is difficult to find them in history books. This is what makes necessary an approach to this phenomenon that combines both, the study of historical sources and the anthropological data, find in the direct testimony of the protagonists of such experiences. That is the reason that throughout all the work I have combined the analysis of texts and myths, with the presentation of historical facts and stories from the women themselves to be able to go inside of the characteristics of Korean women religion.

2. The Korean women have identified themselves throughout history especially with the religious figures and practices that in their religious tradition were related to the welfare of the living and the dead, and in a special way with the protection of the "home". This role in Shamanic, Buddhist and Catholic tradition has been entrusted to the Bodhisattva Gwaneum especially, the Virgin Mary and the female divinities of shamanism, such as Princess Bari.

The Korean woman feels a duty to maintain harmony within the family. And in this work to maintain peace within the family has to fulfil the role of interacting with the gods so that their influences are positive for the family. The woman, as a mother, serves as an intermediary between the divine and the profane. She

within the family serves as priest, monk or shaman, and has the obligation to solve the problems that may arise on daily life. In addition, within this process, women through their religious experience and relationship with the divinity have an obligation to revitalize the family as a whole and each of its members. The woman as mother feels responsible for responding to the daily problems that arise, especially among family members and household deities. She performs the role of intermediary bringing peace to conflict and interceding for the welfare of the family. In this role as a bridge between the human and divine is particularly close to the female divinities.

3. It can be said that the Korean believers are projecting in these rites and devotions to female divinities the image of motherhood that they have learned and internalized from the Korean social and cultural tradition over the centuries. They represented the ideal Mother. At the same time, their relationship with them in their daily religious practices serves to reinforce the identity of traditional Confucian mother inherited from the past.

4. Although the believers of these religious traditions agree to describe Gwaneum, Mary and Barigongju as mothers able to embrace all human beings regardless of their status or behaviour, in fact, their rituals and devotions are reinforcing a vision of society focused on their own nuclear family, although this may go against the basic message that these divinities represent.

This fact reflects the social change that it is taking place in Korea. From a conception of the family in traditional sense, which included all the relatives even distant relatives, and where the local community was considered, somehow, as part of the family; towards a nuclear family which focus only on the closest members the family and their welfare.

5. The religious practices related to the female divinities offer women believers a model that is heavily influenced by religious teachings of each tradition and the traditional Korean culture, which is morally conformed according to Confucian ideas.

The ideas of service, care and filial piety have been assimilated along history and through the myths and rituals, and reaching the faithful today. The believers have managed to embody in their own culture and social reality these devotional expressions and giving them a concrete and new shape. They have adapted them to their own needs and have made them their particular experience.

The Korean women, following the model of motherhood imposed by traditional culture, suffer a major conflict between their own fulfilment at the personal and social level, and the role they should play as mothers. Their devotions and religious practices play a double role, on the one hand, have sometimes served to reinforce the image of the traditional Korean mother, but on the other hand, have also helped them to live in a more meaningful way their role within the family according to their duty of "filial piety" and service.

6. Although they perform most jobs in the churches and temples, their position in the religious structure remains subsidiary.

The Korean religious structure continues to keep women under the patriarchal system, justifying it not only on principles from the cultural tradition but also with the texts from their own Scriptures. The women are kept out of decision-making bodies. The leaders emphasize the work, sacrifice and suffering of the believers as a necessary condition in order to live their faith virtuously.

Another point which must be mention here is the important role that women believers play in the work of getting new adherents to their respective religions. It is mainly through women believers that new recruits are attracted to churches and temples. They play a primary role in the missionary work bringing new members to temples and churches.

7. The Korean shamans represent the group of women within the Korean religious world that has better find the way to adapt to the fast social changes that have occurred in Korea in the last fifty years.

While being the staunchest defender of Korean traditions, they are also those that better have managed to accommodate their roles and rites to the changing needs of Koreans today. They are the synthesis between two of the most characteristic elements of Korean culture: the preservation of forms and dynamism to accept the new. This synthesis can be considered a key element that differentiates the religious experience of the Korean peoples from their neighbours.

8. The salvific and redemptive power that Korean women have given to their religious practices and their relationship with the female divinities.

These salvific experiences, often expressed through mystical experiences and supernatural, are experienced in ordinary life. These experiences are not limited to this but are connected with the past and with family members who preceded them, ancestors, creating mutual aid interdependence between the living and the dead in this process of purification.

9. These salvific and purifying experiences have had the dual role of "refuge" and "liberation" in the lives of Korean women.

Women in the rites and in their relationship with these female deities can forget their position in a strongly patriarchal society that has relegated them to a place of service and subordination to men in almost all spheres of society and religion. In this supernatural world and within the family is where the women becomes the protagonist and can express themselves freely, using their own language without having to conform to the extremely ritualize language that men has imposed in most of the rites and even in the social life and the human relationships.

These female divinities have played a major role in creating an identity for Korean women. This identity often reinforces the identities imposed by Confucianism but at the same time they have served as refuge or shelter from their situation of suffering and oppression. Even in some cases has provided guidance to a process of liberation.

10. One factor that has determined the religion of Korean women and their trust in the liberating powers of the female divinities is their situation of suffering and pain, *han*.

In the figures of the Shamanic goddesses, Gwaneum and Mary, the Korean women have seen reflected their resentment, and have felt strongly attracted by how these figures managed to overcome that pain. The relationship with them gives to the believers an emotional and psychological experience in which women feel freer and may develop a critical stance regarding their situation. But in most cases this awareness does not affect whatsoever the patriarchal and power structure in force in society. They do not use these energies to adjust the system to the needs of women and thus transform it. Women generally found in this relationship with the female divinities a justification to their situation and a consolation, but do not feel motivated to address the system and deal with it. They help to live with the oppression of the system, thus perpetuating the social structure. Although there is in these relationships and religious experiences the potential energy needed to start the change that requires society and assert the claims of Korean women. It has to be done what Besserer called a "subversion of the sentimental order." It must be make a change in how to understand this sentiment, *han*, so it can become the bedrock of a new political and social order, which granted Korean women the place to which they are entitled as citizens equal to men.

11. Another feature of the religion of Korean women is the revelations that through dreams or other mystical experiences they manifested to have.

The dreams have a very special meaning to their lives and usually are interpreted as a profound religious experiences that have helped them to settle and get out of any crisis situation, either within the family, health, or economic. These experiences revitalize them with new energies to tackle any problem. In this way, they give them security and confidence that they can overcome the situation of suffering or distress in which they find themselves. In addition, they reaffirm the conviction that the powers of the female divinities are on their side. According to the Korean tradition of understanding the dreams, the dreams can be a means of communication with other's spirits, especially of those dead. Although this is not unique to Korean culture, it is very characteristic the connection of these experiences with the rituals dedicated to the ancestors. They are considered a test of the effectiveness of such rites. Furthermore, they are experienced in real life and bring to reality the wonders of the other world. The family depends on them for the proper resolution of all kind of problems: health, economic, lack of offspring, and so on. Through these mystical

experiences women are charged with energy to seek solutions to their concerns and sufferings. And they are an opportunity to reaffirm their identities as women and redefine their rightful place in the material world.

12. Most Korean women are experiencing that their relationship with the divine are deeply linked to the idea of purification.

This purifying role of the women rituals and their worship of female deities are related to the interpretation of female sexuality in Korean culture. These ideas have been traditionally used to keep women under the domination of men and creating in them a sense of dirt and pollution, which in many cases has had very negative psychological consequences for the normal development of women as a complete person. These negative effects could be overcome in many instances by the religious rites of purification and his devotion to the female divinities, which offered them the possibility of repentance and contrition as a means to realize their self-purification and thus overcome, at least at the emotional level, the ideas of subordination.

13. A major feature that distinguishes the way men and women understand the relationship with the ancestors is the much more inclusive and welcoming character of women's rites.

This way of looking at the ancestors by Korean women and how they relate with them to maintain harmony between the living and the dead has also a great influence on the understanding the role of female deities as saviours or redeemers. They play an important role in the salvation of the ancestors and in helping them to achieve eternal rest, either in the Catholic heaven or the Buddhist and Shamanistic paradise.

Korean women have been the one's that have developed these beliefs along Korean history and deepened into their meaning. They have been who have discovered in these female divinities, figures that not only helped and console the living, but also those who suffer in the other world. The ancestors are like the elderly or other living relatives and, therefore, the social relationships also apply to them. That is why the believers relate to the ancestors and living relatives in the same way. And in response the ancestors treat the living relatives as they did when they were with them.

14. Another important element that Korean women found in their religious experience, the rites and the cult to female deities is that they become a place to rest and regain energy in times of crisis. But at the same time these rites have been used by the official religion dominated by men to keep women under their control, and to maintain the traditional patriarchal order when they feel threatened by the forces of modernity or changes in society.

15. The religion of Korean women shows how women have a great capacity to intervene in the everyday life, in the happenings of ordinary life. Their religiosity and its symbols are more in touch with the reality in which they are

submerged. Women have been more able to use it in everyday events, recognizing the symbolic meaning of ordinary things.

16. The religion of Korean women has a syncretic-holistic characteristic that has enabled them throughout history to seek more the integration and encounter than the separation and exclusion.

Conclusion

Religions, especially in their official dimension, tend to be "religiocentric" and exclusive, believing that they have all the truth and be the only authentic way. This makes it difficult the encounter and dialogue between religions and their members, but Korea, in particular through the religiosity of its women, has the potential to become a meeting point of understanding between different religions and dialogue among cultures and religions. This requires giving the religion of women their just importance, and to consider how it can become a source of transformation and energy. These religious experiences may become places of "resistance" and vindication of the rights of women, places to promote the changes and reforms in society and promote tolerance and cultural-religious pluralism.