

History of Korea - Part Four

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The early inhabitants of the Korean peninsula, by the weight of circumstances, were a violent and war-like people. At the same time they were a religious people. They were keenly interested in their place in both the physical world around them and the world unseen. From time immemorial they conceived of that other world and embodied a belief and practice to manipulate it. They brought it with them from the reaches of far off Siberia. It was called Shamanism and Mooism in their language. At its center was the Moodang or shaman. They believed in animism, totemism and the spirit world. The spirit world was everywhere and had much to do with the outcomes of the events on the earth. Everything including mountains, rivers, the sky, trees, tigers, bears, and grasshoppers were inhabited by invisible spirits. These spirits affected the outcome of all things good or bad.

The shaman or Moodang was the ultimate guide to the spirit world. The Moodang was able to discern the spirits, communicate with them and, through entering a trance, enter their world. Since it was believed that all forms of disease and malfesance were caused by spirits, the Moodang was a witch doctor and healer. She became a master of all growing things and their use as medicine. Because the future of all things resided in the spirit world, the Moodang was adept at divination. When the fate of the tribe hung in the balance on the eve of a big move or battle, a talented Moodang was worth her weight in kimchee. If she was right in her predictions, her prestige rose and she might even become close to the headman, chief, or king. Such a shaman might be called Mon gun (Prince of Heaven) In the ancient period, there were in Korea religious figures called Mon'gun (天君. " Prince of Heaven ") who acted as intercessors for their people at certain great yearly ceremonies. These figures inherited their positions and were in many cases the political rulers of their people. There were also lesser figures who were concerned with the curing of disease and the dispatch of the souls of the dead to the next world.

These three primary concerns of the primeval religion, namely inter-cession, curing and the dispatch of the souls of the dead, likewise remain the principal concerns of modern Korean folk religion. If she were wrong there was always a hole in the ground and a long long sleep. It was a game for astute gamblers. In the Siberian tradition, Moodangs were almost all women. There were some cross dressing and living men, and the rare male practitioners. The Moodang believed that they were chosen by an ambitious spirit. If the acolyte rejected the calling, great suffering followed for days, weeks, months, and even years. The initiation was blood changing, that is sexual. Through a sexual relationship, literally or symbolically, the acolyte became the wife of God.

This shamanism was practiced unabated from the earliest stone age tribes down to the kingdoms of the Three kingdoms period.

Buddhism was introduced into the Goguryeo Kingdom of Korea in 372 CE, making it the first Korean kingdom to adopt the religion. A monk named Sundo from the Qian Qin Dynasty of China introduced Buddhism to Goguryeo. This event marked the beginning of Buddhism's significant influence on Korean culture and society. China was the big kid on the block and had all the latest technology and culture that could lend to the significance of the smaller neighboring country. When the emperor of China sent a representative to the Goguryeo court, they were all ears. Buddhism was not a jealous master like Christianity that demanded absolute adherence, they simply presented their teachings and lived an example. The leadership was won over and the people had little choice. Shamanism was not the big loser. Folks continued to practice the old religion when appropriate or needed. Bhudisim mixed nicely with the old ways and the two existed together for a long time and in many cases became indistinguishable. The form of Buddhism transmitted to Goguryeo from northern China and central Asia was already mixed with shamanism and the missionaries were masters of making this Buddhism attractive mainly through occultism and magic.

Another cultural acquisition from China was Confucianism. This philosophy was a system of ethics and right relationships to create a healthy and balanced society. It described right relationships between parents and children, brothers and sisters, the government and citizens, and the king and the nation. Its

filial piety, family, and duty was most important. On the other hand, to Bhudisim letting go of all things including family was essential. They were natural rivals. The royalty and ruling elite found the orderliness of Confucianism useful and so it became the leading ideology and Goguryeo established a Confucian academy (Tae Hak) to promote the philosophy in 372. Buddhism was studied, practiced, and believed by a large number of the population. Buddhists tended to be more mystical and built their monasteries in the mountains. Confucianists held more sway in the towns and cities. Shamanism continued everywhere.

In 571 CE, Shilla received Buddhism via a Chinese monk, Ado, living in Goguryeo. It was the form popular in Goguryeo that was liberally combined with shamanism. It took some time for the new religion to gain acceptance in the Shilla kingdom. By 528 it was installed as the state religion. The first Buddhist temple was built in 538 CE. Other Chinese imports like Confucianism and Taoism played smaller roles and Shamanism continued to dominate everyday life.

Baekje on the Han river and the West Coast was somewhat of a maritime power. That is it became a conduit for Chinese culture that included Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and the entire spectrum of Chinese culture to Japan and South Asia. Having received syncretized Buddhism and shamanism from Central Asia, China, and Goguryeo, it's what they had to pass on to Japan and other trading partners. Thus it was Baekje that was responsible for the esoteric Buddhist culture of Japan.

The Buddhism of the three kingdoms was the esoteric Bhudisim fully syncretized with shamanism. The Buddhist rites that were practiced to protect the kingdoms, cure disease, divine the future for the elite as well as the low born, were fully shamanistic.

King Hön'gang (875-86) of the Silla kingdom encountered thick mist on the beach of the East Sea and an astronomer reported to the king that the mist foretold the malevolent arrival of a dragon. When the king performed a Buddhist Ritual for the dragon and promised to construct a temple for him, the mist dissipated and the dragon and his seven sons danced in the presence of the king. Ch'öyong, one of the dragon's sons, entered Kyöngju, the capital of the Silla kingdom, to assist the royal government. The king bade him to marry a beautiful woman. When Ch'öyong returned home from going out one day, he found that his wife was sleeping under a coverlet with a man, who was identified as the spirit of smallpox.

Ch'öyong withdrew from the scene in silence and danced and sang a song. The lyrics of Ch'öyong are also recorded in the Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms and the dance that Ch'öyong danced is the Dance of Ch'öyong. The evil spirit eventually knelt down, begged for forgiveness, and promised that he would never intrude into a private property where Ch'öyong portrait was posted, generating the custom that people in later times put the picture of Ch'öyong on the doors of their houses in order to be protected from illness. Such narratives are typical of the occultism and magic of the synchrony of shamanism and Buddhism recorded in the histories of The Three Kingdoms.

Based on the teachings of prominent esoteric Buddhist schools in China, Shilla kings built elaborate temples in the shape of Mandalas to create sacred space to protect the kingdom. This concept of sacred space was unique to Korean shamanism. The arts and culture of Korea are deeply embedded in esoteric Buddhism. Many Korean folk dancers point to the respiration or breathing, namely inhaling and exhaling, as basic principles as well as characteristics of Korean dance. Such a tendency to focus on the respiration is considered to be one of the constituting elements of the Korean culture. The respiration in Korean dances reflects the mythical imagery of Koreans. The 'Ho' while inhaling is associated with the initiation rite of shamanism, with the meaning of death, which means that one abandons his or her desires and empties the self, the 'Heup' while exhaling may signify the 'revival', a regeneration of killing 'the self'. In Korean myth, a hero can be seated as a god who saves the world, after he was thrown away and then has experienced mortal agonies. The Korean dances have correlations with such mystical imagery, in terms of meaning. The hand movements reflect extension while exhaling and contracting while inhaling. The extension of the foot, heel to toe and the contracting of the foot toe to heel movement also reflect this meaning.

The world famous cultural remains of Shilla at Kyongju, 불국사 (Buddhist nation temple) and the magnificent Sokkur-am grotto Stone Cave Hermitage located at the top of T'oham-san near Kyongju, the old capital of Shilla are existing examples of the blending of Buddhism and Shamanism in Korea.

Hwarang society

According to the Samguk Yus(three kingdom history), the Silla king, "concerned about the strengthening of the country ... again issued a decree and chose boys from good families who were of good morals and renamed them hwarang or flowering youth. Previously there had been groups of women, Wonhwa or original flowers, dedicated to beauty and the arts. The youths who were chosen by the Silla Kingdom became the knights and warriors for the Silla dynasty within the age of the Three Kingdoms of Korea. A close relationship did exist between the Hwarang and Buddhism because Buddhism was accepted as a state religion by the royalty and aristocrats within the Silla Kingdom. The Buddhist monks were often

mentors for the Hwarang in both physical and spiritual ways. The Hwarang would seek the teachings of these Buddhist monks because they knew that the martial arts practiced by these Buddhist monks were a source through which they could strengthen themselves for greater success in the future and for the benefit of the Silla Kingdom. The monks would train themselves in physical fitness exercises through self-defense techniques, countering the weakening effects of long-term meditation and enabling them to protect themselves from bandits and robbers who tried to steal the donations and charities that were collected by the monks on their pilgrimages. Both the Buddhist monks and the Hwarang would go on journeys to famous mountains to heighten their training and would seek encounters with supernatural beings for enlightenment.

The struggle among the three kingdoms continued until Shilla enlisted the help of the Chinese Tang dynasty and was finally able to overcome the two brother nations and create the Kingdom of United Shilla.