

Korean Shamanic Initiation as Therapeutic Transformation: A Transcultural View

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Shamanism is an excellent subject for transcultural comparative exploration because it spans the prehistory of hunting/gathering societies through to the present history of shamanic adaptations in many agricultural and industrial societies. Likewise, shamanism in some form is present on every continent and in Oceania. Shamanism is primarily concerned with the bringing together in harmony and maximum mutual fulfillment of the person, the society, and the non-human environment. This is precisely the traditional therapeutic commitment of the social work profession. It is also becoming the commitment of other contemporary helping and healing professions, especially under the rubric of "holistic health." Such new holistic approaches in medicine and mental health service are really returns to primal insights, since shamanistic holism is probably the oldest and most prevalent surviving style of therapy in the world. This study will examine initiation into the shamanic profession as a process which therapeutically transforms the initiate and prepares him or her for professional healing practice. The typical transcultural features

of shamanism and shamanic initiation will be presented. A detailed examination of the initiatory illness and cure of Korean shamans will follow. Thereby, the Korean phenomenon will be illuminated as a culturally shaped form of a universal spiritual and psychosocial pattern.

The Shaman as a Religious Specialist of Healing

The shaman is a religious specialist who uses a technique of ecstasy in order to transcend the profane condition, attain sacred power, and channel that power for the benefit of the community.¹ The shaman learns to voluntarily alter his state of consciousness and enter a trance which enables direct communication with sacred forces and entities. A trance is frequently imaged as flight of the soul out of the body, transformation of the shaman into a bird on the wing, or possession by spirits who rend the shaman from ordinary human existence. Trance is achieved with the assistance of per-

cession, dance, singing, and sometimes psychoactive substances. The shamanistic style of religious experience is usually highly emotional, involving dramatic and often shocking behaviors. In this way, the shamanistic style of consciousness manipulation is frequently quite different from the mystical contemplative style which typically emphasizes serenity, cessation and transcendence of images, and physically immobile trance states. Shamanistic style is lush and colorful aesthetically; its evocative imagery is reminiscent of ecstatic visions and eidetic imagination.

Shamanic symbolism tends to be proximate in its orientation; that is, sacred entities such as spirits of nature are often portrayed anthropomorphically with distinct personalities, likes and dislikes. Contact with spirits is sought in order to obtain practical and material benefits such as economic success, fruitful hunting or planting, healing, and increase of social status. In sum, shamanistic treatment focuses on the facilitation of successful passage through critical transitions. In Western therapeutic terms, it is oriented toward crisis intervention. Shamanism is generally concerned with activity within a dualistic frame of reference, extensively dealing with the magical manipulation of objects for human benefit. This is also in marked contrast to a mystical orientation which typically seeks transcendence of duality and contact with the divine as valuable ends in themselves, regardless of material benefit. This is not to say that shamanism never transcends dualism; however, shamanistic practice is directed toward achieving material success (which includes spiritual health) conceived in dualistic terms. It should be added that intimacy and rapport with nature are central to shamanistic techniques and concern. Recognition of the interdependency of all things is a forte of shamanism; treatment often addresses the maintenance of harmony and the balancing and reconciling of opposites within these interrelationships. Indeed, the greatest shamans are characterized by mystical profundity as well as a practical healing vocation.

According to this definition, shamanism is opposed to harm-intending sorcery and merely egocentric spiritual pleasures. The *raison d'être* of shamanism is the healing of persons and groups. When shamans seek self-aggrandizement, excess of power, or practice harm-magic for profit, they forfeit the legitimacy of their vocation and are apt to suffer punishment at the hands of spirits and humans. Of course, harm-intending sorcery sometimes coexists with shamanism as a deviation or as a separate cult.

The word "shaman" entered English vocabulary via the studies of Russian ethnographers investigating Siberian tribal life, particularly that of the Tungus who employ the word *saman*.² However, shamanism has a worldwide distribution, probably originating within paleolithic hunting/gathering contexts. It is often retained in modified form after the transition to agriculture and animal domestication, as it was in traditional Korea. It is most frequently found at band and tribe levels of social organization and tends to be replaced or subjugated by institutionalized priest-centered religions at the chiefdom level. Pressures within the industrial state usually have a rapid demythologizing, desacralizing, and depotentiating effect upon shamanistic religions. As in contemporary Korea, the various functions of the shaman are then often replaced to some extent by other religious and secular specialists such as ministers, physicians, and psychotherapists.

Shamanistic cosmology conforms to culturally specific patterns, yet it is rarely systematized in philosophical or theological language. It is very syncretistic, borrowing diverse elements from its cultural matrix, including coexisting religions such as Buddhism in East Asia and Christianity in South America. Despite local variations, shamanism shares typical cosmological constructions cross-culturally. It maintains the common postulation of three cosmic zones which are vertically connected. Heaven, earth, and the underworld (subterranean and subaquatic) are linked by sacred vertical structures such as mountain, tree, ladder, or temple. These

vertical connectors are assimilated to the archetype of the *axis mundi*, the "center of the world," where passage between the three cosmic zones takes place and by which sacred power is conveyed directly to humanity. In this connection, the mountain spirit is an important Korean deity.³ Shamanism emphasizes the shaman's ability to ascend and descend by ecstatic flights of the soul.⁴ The three cosmic zones are populated by a wide variety of numinous forces and sacred beings. Those which are not perceivable by ordinary persons are specially attended by shamans in order to ensure that their activities are beneficial to the human community. A supreme sky god is often regarded with respect and devotion; however, he is usually considered to be extremely remote from most human affairs. Likewise, *hananim* is not usually an intimate of the Korean shaman.⁵ Therefore shamanistic ritual is directed primarily toward spirits and numinous forces which are more closely involved with human life. The shaman's fundamental task is to maintain harmony and health in the world, if necessary by magical manipulation of a ritually established microcosm which sympathetically affects the macrocosm. Characteristically, this is accomplished by recalling *illud tempus*, the mythic original time of intimacy between heaven and earth, to the present. All shamanic activity can be called healing in the deepest sense; the shaman brings together into a harmonized and ordered whole all the interrelated parts of a disordered situation in the treatment of the individual, family, community, and even the entire cosmos. Recall that the word "heal" comes from the Old English word for "whole."

Transformation of the Shaman through Initiatory Disorder and Cure

The shamanic initiatory process involves two aspects: spontaneous sacred selection and formal training.⁶ The neophyte is called by sacred forces to become their medium.

Some response to this call is mandatory. Frequently those who resist risk serious illness or death. Typically, sacred forces manifest their choice of a medium by drastically disrupting the selected person's emotional, physical, mental, and social balance. The shaman recruit is subjected to temporary disorder with the goal of recreating him on a higher level of health, social status, and religious meaning. This transformational process is often imaged as death and rebirth.

During this period the neophyte is instructed through visions and dreams about cosmography and the mechanisms of sickness and healing. Having experienced deathly illnesses and been cured by accepting the shamanic vocation, a shaman learns the art of curing others. A shaman recruit may also be selected by formal social designation, such as a rule of hereditary transmission. An aspiring candidate may also decide on his own to pursue contact with the sacred and formal initiation. These latter types of shamans, in Korea and elsewhere, are usually considered to be less powerful than those who experience a spontaneous call. In any case, the successful shaman must learn to exercise supreme balance and discipline in order to enter voluntary trance, control ecstatic behavior, and assume the identities of various spirits while maintaining integration of the personality.⁷

Michael Harner, an anthropologist and shamanist practitioner, recounts two of his own introductory field experiences with shamanism in South America which were important to his initiation into the shamanic way. He had difficulty eliciting information about the religion of the Conibo of the Peruvian Amazon area. They told him that he must first drink a potion of *ayahuasca*, made from a powerful psychotropic vine. Its transforming power is attested to by one of its names, "little death."⁸ It is consumed in shamanic religious contexts. At the peak of Harner's vision, he received a revelation of "...secrets reserved for the dying and the dead." He said, "I could only very dimly perceive the givers of these thoughts: giant rep-

tilian creatures reposing sluggishly at the lowermost depths of the back of my brain, where it met at the top of the spinal column.”⁹ Later, he pursued formal training in shamanism with the Jivaro of the Ecuadorean Andes. Two Jivaro took him to a waterfall to seek vision. He was given a concoction of *maikua*, a type of *datura*, which is psychotropic and potentially poisonous. One of the guides said, “What is important is that you have no fear. If you see something frightening, you must not flee. You must run up and touch it.”¹⁰ Indeed, he encountered in his vision a serpentine monster which he overcame by a direct charge with a stick. This well illustrates that a shaman initiate, even a “sophisticated” anthropologist, must be able to confront the fearsome and the deadly with courage, endurance, and an empowering vigor.

Initiation is completed by didactic and traditional education in the shamanic profession under the tutelage of a master shaman. During formal apprenticeship, the neophyte’s visionary experience is carefully enculturated. Elements of his experience are discarded, emphasized, or refined. The cosmos as culturally defined is named and magically navigated. The neophyte’s experience is organized and made coherent according to his cultural heritage. The neophyte learns relevant myths and rituals. He becomes acquainted with sacred paraphernalia. He tests and improves his ability to enter trance at will, prognosticate, and cure. It is important to note that a shaman becomes master of sacred power only as a servant of the sacred. The shaman must submit to onslaughts of the sacred, conform to sacred imperatives, and remold his life in the sacred mode of being. When balance is achieved, the shaman is able to help others successfully pass through critical transitions, just as he himself has learned to do in a vivid and intense manner.

The initiation process for *marakame*, the shaman of the Huichol Indians of the central Mexican highlands, for example, is lengthy and disciplined.¹¹ Sacred selection appears to occur in alternate generations,

mostly among males. Frequently an orphan, the youngest, or the only child of a family is selected. In addition, the candidate must be individually qualified with great intelligence, strength and endurance. He must be able to chant nonstop for many hours, perform without sleep or food for long durations, and lead other pilgrims to the sacred land of peyote, the psychoactive cactus, on an arduous desert trip. He must have an extraordinary memory for songs, myths, chants and other ritual details. He must have the capacity for empathy and social sensitivity. He must learn much about healing medicines. He must be profoundly spiritual and willing to sacrifice comforts for a life of dedication to religious service. He is likely to remain a poor person but will be rich in esteem and satisfaction. He is thought to be chosen by divine favor, especially from Tatewari, “Our Grandfather Fire.” The initial call often comes without deprivation or drugs to a small boy, but the actual assumption of the shaman’s role will not occur until middle age. The shaman recruit first engages in a long informal apprenticeship with a master *marakame*. He must learn far more than the nonshaman. He must become respected, intellectual, self-controlled, noted for good judgement and skilled at story-telling, singing, playing the violin, and performing other arts. Then the initiate endures a five year probation consisting of sacrifices, scrupulous fidelity to his wife, frequent fasts and abstentions from salt and sleep. Then he must lead the pilgrims to *Wirikuta*, the sacred land of their divine ancestors and the source of peyote. Five more years of learning from peyote visions must follow to complete training. Few succeed the attempted initiation because of insufficient ability to control the power resulting from sacred contacts or because of yielding to the temptations of sorcery.

The shaman’s quest for sacred revelations, during the initiatory period and ongoing efforts for renewal, may require both physical and envisioned expeditions into dangerous wilderness and solitude. As an arctic Caribou shaman once told the explorer Knud Ras-

mussen,

...all true wisdom is only to be learned far from the dwellings of men, out in the great solitudes; and it is only to be attained through suffering. Privation and suffering are the only things that can open the mind of man to those things which are hidden from others.¹²

To use a Buddhist analogy, the Korean scholar of Oriental Philosophy, Yu Sūng-guk remarked, "Agony is the body of Nirvana itself."¹³ The Sioux Indians of the Plains have developed a refined version of the vision quest through purification, ordeals, and solitude. The Oglala Sioux chief Maza Blaska explained,

To the Holy Man comes in youth the knowledge that he will be holy. The Great Mystery makes him know this. Sometimes it is the Spirits who tell him...With the Spirits the Holy Man may commune always, and they teach him holy things.¹⁴

The initiatory ordeals, both spontaneous and ritualized, which are a prerequisite for fully opening the vision of the shaman, can be extremely severe. For example, the arctic explorer Rasmussen recounts about a shaman named Kinalik:

Her own initiation had been severe; she was hung up to some tent poles planted in the snow and left there for five days. It was midwinter, with intense cold and frequent blizzards, but she did not feel cold, for the spirit protected her.

After five days she was taken down, carried into a house, and then shot with a stone from a gun. She fell unconscious and revived the next day. Another male shaman initiate was reportedly submerged under the ice of a lake for five days. "...and when at last they hauled him up again, his clothes showed no sign of having been in the water at all, and he himself had become a great wizard, having overcome death."¹⁵

Such accounts, which may seem incredulous to the uninitiated, are frequently maintained by shamanists. The important point here is that the shaman initiate must endure deadly

ordeals in order to be reborn as a sacred healer. The shaman initiate experiences deathly illness and suffering and is healed by assuming the shamanic role. This struggle with the forces of disease and death is sometimes envisioned as a battle with demons and monsters of the underworld. It sometimes requires the literal loss of limb. The shaman can later utilize the knowledge and power gleaned from the successful struggle in order to assist others through the healing process. As the anthropologist and ritualist Joan Halifax has put it:¹⁶

The shamans who have sacrificed themselves to the "great task" and become the sacrament for spirit forces learn the art of dying and acquire the knowledge of healing particular illnesses from the spirits that have consumed their flesh.

The shaman learns to integrate the experiences of sickness, suffering, dying, and death, as well as to share the special knowledge of these powerful events with those who face disease or death for the first time.

The psychologist Stephen Larsen has noted the superficial similarity between the initiatory disorders of shamans and various western categories of psychopathology, such as hysteria, schizophrenia, multiple personality, or epilepsy. Although some investigators have assumed an identity between these disorders, Larsen emphasizes that this is simplistic and inaccurate.¹⁷ In the life of the shaman recruit, such a period of disorder is an integral part of the cure and transition to higher levels of health. In addition, the culture of the shaman provides a context which typically esteems, supports, and assists the resolution of the disorder into higher levels of order. This process is recognized to be constructive, indeed reconstruction, although rigorous and fearsome. Initiatory disorder is a necessary "...invitation to shamanize," as Larsen puts it. In contrast to a deleterious neurosis, Larsen says, "...the shamanic crisis, when properly fostered, yields an adult not only of superior intelligence and refinement, but also of greater

physical stamina and vitality of spirit than is normal to the members of his group.”¹⁸ The shamanic process of disordering and reordering of the initiate is often experienced as a death and rebirth, as we have seen. Larsen points out that death and rebirth is the most fundamental symbolism of transformation. It is an awesome and fearsome symbolism, with quite literal manifestations, when subjectively experienced. But it can be empowering and life enhancing. However, if the cultural environment of the experiencer does not provide normative, conceptual, and practical guidance, then the danger of debilitating results is high. Larsen aptly states: “The real terror—and even suicidal urges—comes when one does not know the mythological pattern; i.e., that the experience of deep despair is always prelude to an invitation to rebirth.” This danger is great in Western societies because, “We have, in fact, no senior shamans to help ensure that our dismemberment be followed by a rebirth.”¹⁹ Even traditional and contemporary Korea has complicated this delicate balance during recurrent periods of persecution and ostracism of shamanism.

In sum, the shaman initiate plunges into experiences of death, suffering, and disorder with the support of master shamans. The successful recruit emerges as a transformed being, held to be sacred by his society to which he brings a healing ministry. As the anthropologist I. M. Lewis said, “The shaman is not the slave, but the master of anomaly and chaos.”²⁰ In fact, the greater the disorder mastered, the greater is the demonstrated authority and health of the shaman.

Initiatory Disorder and Transformation in Korean Shamanism

Shamanism is the most ancient indigenous tradition of Korea, possibly derived from Siberian Ural-Altaic prototypes with paleolithic hunting/gathering antecedents.²¹ This original Siberian shamanism became

adapted to neolithic agriculturalism and increasing social complexity on the Korean peninsula. Apparently, it was allied with the royal families of early Korean kingdoms such as Silla. The introduction of Chinese culture continued to transform Korean shamanism into a blend of agricultural shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Gradually, Korean shamanism fell into an ambivalent and ostracized status, especially during Korea’s final Chosŏn dynasty. However, shamanism continues to thrive in an agricultural/industrial context. Presently, women are the most numerous and most powerful shamans. They are most commonly called *mudang*. They perform ceremonies and rituals, called *kut*, in order to divine the future, heal the afflicted, and overcome misfortunes.

The initiatory process of Korean shamans emphasizes the importance of the spontaneous call and spirit-sent illnesses, called *sinbyŏng* (literally, spirit sickness). A synonym is *sinchip’yŏtta*, meaning ‘caught by spirits’ or ‘fingered by spirits.’²³

During the formal initiation ritual, called *naerim-kut*, the neophyte establishes an adoptive daughter/mother relationship with a master shaman and intentionally invites the indwelling of guiding spirits. This signals the cure of *sinbyŏng* and the beginning of a life-long therapeutic profession. *Sinbyŏng* involves total disruption of the shaman recruit’s life. Somatic symptoms are varied with frequent gastrointestinal maladies. Mental symptoms include waking and dream visions which prove to be symbolically significant or prophetic. Social functioning is seriously impeded. These symptoms are external evidence of the drastic transformation which the shaman undergoes. *Sinbyŏng* ordeals are severe tests with a purpose. *The spirits afflict the shaman recruit in order to transform her into a sacred healer*, not in order to annihilate her. Korean shamans differentially diagnose between mere pathology and initiatory disruptions. However, because of shamanism’s ambivalent status in Korea, people often resist the call from the

spirits. Yet resistance is likely to result in psychosis, prolonged illness, or death. Therefore, the recruit eventually submits to the irrevocable call and formally accepts the spirits at the *naerim-kut*.

The concomitant of religious suffering is religious ecstasy. *Sinbyōng* involves very disruptive elation as well as pain. The *mudang* P'yōngyang-mansin says that during the initial weeks following her first possession she felt intoxicated, as if floating on clouds, and unconcerned with ordinary affairs. Similarly, another shaman, Ttongkkol-mansin, relates that she felt exhilarated and absolutely superior.²⁴

Initiatory destruction impels reconstruction on a higher plane. Koreans recognize *sinbyōng* to be distinct from merely profanely induced sickness and also from debilitating sicknesses caused by spirit intrusions. A shaman from Kyōnggi Province described:

You just have to see them to tell the difference. *Mich'in* people look like they're in pain somewhere (*ōdi ap'ūda*). Future shamans wander here and there and keep singing out: "I'm this spirit: I'm that spirit."²⁵

Neurotic and psychotic episodes are similar to shamanic possession, but possession cannot be reduced to them. P'yōngyang-mansin compares the course of *sinbyōng* to the erratic behavior of the insane person: "They (the spirits) come to you in spasms. At the peak, the symptoms intensify for a few days and then let up."²⁶ The insane person's sense of reality uncontrollably shifts its shape, plunging him into extreme disorientation and dysfunction. The initiated shaman's reality shifts its shape in a controlled manner, facilitated by alliance with sacred entities and ritual manipulation. The successful shaman recruit endures initiatory disruptions and assimilates the sacred power provided, first at the *sinnaerim-kut* during which the spirits are officially invited to descend, and then through a life-long transactional relationship with spirits. The shaman serves as a bridge between the sacred and profane, doing the bidding of spirits and

enlisting their aid for her clients.

Considerable intellectual analysis, artistic performance, and emotional sensitivity are employed to learn control of sacred power. Initiation and instruction by a human master must follow initiation by spirits in order to safeguard the neophyte's sacred balance and bring it into conformance with culturally specific requirements for behavior and belief. The *mudang* Wangsimni-mansin says that ecstasy can drive one insane if one is not properly initiated.²⁷ A shaman of Seoul, mentioned later as the venerator of the sun and moon, remained an apprentice for three years following her *naerim-kut* before she could independently exercise her power. P'yōngyang-mansin was initiated by a shaman whom she met in a dream. She recalls,

On that day, the old *mudang* and I agreed to become adoptive mother and daughter...We worked together ever since, she teaching me whatever I needed to know and I, assisting her and learning by doing and watching...She officiated at my *naerim-kut* (initiation rite)... When she died, I 'inherited' her clientele.²⁸

According to her, the failure rate for neophyte shamans is high because of mediocrity and lack of intelligence.²⁹ When the shaman successfully assimilates the power of her spirits and learns to maintain equilibrium, ecstasy (*kongsu*) liberates her from profane limitations. Wonderful vitality and healing energy fill her. After Ttongkkol-mansin's *sinbyōng* stroke, a *kut* was performed for her on an auspicious day. She immediately felt the incoming of her spirits and soon had no difficulty carrying and brandishing the heavy spears and swords necessary for the ritual. Before long, she was able to complete the *kut* herself, stunning the participants with her amazing recovery. Despite temporary lapses, she explains, Ttongkkol-mansin always feels inspired at the divination table. Words well up from the depths of her belly and tumble out of her mouth.³⁰ Christian deaconess Chang, a former *mudang*, vividly recalls the feeling of

transcendence she had while dancing with drum and cymbals as a *mudang*:

You are in a state of ecstasy; there is no other way of describing the feeling...When you are in that state, you can clearly see the hosts and spirits that possess you; you know what their voices should sound like, what they should say..., it all just comes to you.

According to Wangsimni-mansin:

When you start doing your own *kut*, you just feel your spirits stealing into you and taking over; the sensation is incomparable...You just know that you've got the spirits in you...You're just a medium and you feel marvelous. Otherwise, how could anyone do the things a *mudang* does in her sober mind?...you are suffused with the feeling, "I'm number one, the best—there is none else like me in the whole world!"³¹

During the *kut*, the *mudang* is not only a medium for spirits, but actually becomes identified with them. This necessitates control and direction of the ecstatic consciousness. Each *kori* (section) of a *kut* (shamanic ritual) may require contact and communication with a specific spirit. To this end, the shaman dons the costume of a spirit, thereby assuming its identity. A major *kut* involves several days of preparation, the ritual itself lasting from eight to ten hours. The shaman endures intense emotional and physical stresses, is able to memorize and recite long chants, performs dancing, singing, and even feats of trickery and acrobatics.³² All the while she must maintain a rapport with the audience in order to facilitate their healing catharsis. In order to meet all of these requirements, the shaman must maintain a condition which is at once ecstatic and disciplined.

The following case of a Seoul shaman's initiatory process is typical.³³ Between the ages 22-25, she showed increasingly severe symptoms of *sinbyōng*. She lost her appetite; lacking food, she became light-headed and sometimes wasn't sure her feet were touching the ground. Her mental disturbances disrupted domestic performance. Sometimes she felt as if suffocating; other times she felt like she soared into the sky.

She sobbed suddenly and without apparent cause. When she was 27 she saw visions of the sun and moon on a wall of her home during the daytime; at this sight she jumped up and moved wildly. Her husband tried to cure her with a *kut*; but at the *kut* she danced and clapped her hands, signalling her acceptance of the spirits. Afterwards, she enshrined images of the sun and the moon spirits for their importance in her initiation. When she began practicing as a shaman, her afflictions disappeared.

Suwōn-mansin, another Seoul *mudang*, had her first attack of *sinbyōng* when she was 29.³⁴ After recovering from an appendectomy, she was suddenly rehospitalized for unaccountable gastrointestinal malfunction. Her symptoms spontaneously disappeared and reoccurred several times. During a visit home at this period, a giant appeared to her while she was urinating. The giant threw her across the courtyard and dislocated both her shoulders. Despite repeated hospital treatment, this incident reoccurred several times. Later she wandered about sacred places and acted in bizarre and disruptive ways. At one point, she warned the police chief that if he didn't allow a shamanistic sacrifice within 3 days, a catastrophe would occur. On the third day, the police station burned to the ground. Her brother, out of shame and desperation, prompted her into a suicide attempt which failed. She felt that she had been delivered from illness and death to become a shaman. Therefore, she began a practice in Seoul. One day she stopped a stranger on the street and warned him of impending misfortune due to snakes defiling his father's corpse. Indeed, his father had recently been buried. They exhumed the body and found the molted skin of a snake wrapped around one leg! The body was moved according to the shaman's instructions. The man subsequently won an important court case. Convinced of the shaman's extraordinary talents, he became her loyal client. Here we see that the initially disruptive power of contact with spirits is successfully controlled to enable not only adequate personal functioning, but also performance

apparently above the "normal."

When the shaman Ttongkkol-mansin was 34, she became ill with a high fever which lapsed into a coma after several days.³⁵ After several more days, her relatives began preparing for her funeral. However, she shocked everyone by suddenly recovering; her neighbors thought she returned from the dead. Ttongkkol-mansin experienced this episode as a long, deep sleep in which she met her ancestral spirits. The spirits gave her a minute version of a Chinese primer, turning the first five pages for her. They said, "If we should turn all seven pages, you'd gain passage through the universe. We'll come back in fifteen years to turn the rest." The fifteenth year came in 1971; she claims to have died and been called back to the living three times during that year. One of these times, she returned with one side of her body completely paralyzed for 21 days. However, after performing a *kut* she was cured. She recalls her condition during the first coma:

I was like a crazy woman...a woman whose soul had been wandering. I remember falling desperately sick. The chronic peritonitis (self-diagnosis) I'd been suffering from for four years flared up badly. I was throwing up pus. But now, I felt fine (i.e. when she woke up from her sleep). My body was clean, as if it had never been diseased. People were making a commotion, shouting: 'A dead woman is walking. She has come back from the netherworld,' and such. At first, I couldn't fathom their behavior...All I had done was to step out of the room and into the courtyard because my mother, who had died when I was nineteen, called me to come out. When I went out, my mother was nowhere; only the spirits were there...³⁶

After her recovery she was given to erratic behaviors and irrational utterances which proved to be prophetic. She was also able to locate lost items. Two days afterwards, she had a vision of an old shaman living near the DMZ who was to pass on her spirits. Guided by spirits, she travelled a long distance in winter weather to find the old shaman at the unknown location. She found the *mudang* exactly according to the dream. Although

the old shaman did not yet want to give up her spirits, they followed Ttongkkol-mansin anyway.

In this case, the initiation scheme of death and rebirth is highly literal. By conquering the portals of death, she acquired the ability to transcend space and time limitations, as evidenced by her reported abilities of precognition and telepathy. Strictly speaking, these extraordinary powers were not her own, but rather they were given to her by spirits.

The historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, highlights the spiritual aspect of the shaman's initiatory transformation. In agreement with Larsen's and Lewis' views previously stated, Eliade views shamanic initiatory disorder as a manifestation of a reconstructive therapeutic growth process. He states:

We shall explain why we consider it unacceptable to assimilate shamanism to any kind of mental disease. But one point remains (and it is an important one), to which the psychologist will always be justified in drawing attention: like any other religious vocation, the shamanic vocation is manifested by a crisis, a temporary derangement of the future shaman's spiritual equilibrium. All the observations and analyses that have been made on this point are particularly valuable. They show us, in actual process as it were, the repercussions, within the psyche, of what we have called the "dialectic of hierophanies"—the radical separation between profane and sacred and the resultant splitting of the world.³⁷

By "dialectic of hierophany," Eliade refers to the religious person's experience of manifestation of the holy (hierophany) as a revelation which disrupts and transforms its medium of manifestation from an ordinary and profane mode of being into an extraordinary, numinous, and sacred mode of being. When hierophanization occurs in a human medium, as in shamanic and mystical conversion, a drastic alteration and elevation of the total person results, as we have seen.

Jung Young Lee analyzes the *sinbyöng* process as the repression and release of

libido, especially for psychosocially repressed and suppressed Korean women.³⁸ Lee recounts the myth of the rejected princess, Pari Kongju. She was rejected by her royal father because she was the seventh daughter, thus disappointing his hopes for a male successor. However, the woman was aided by divine beings, raised by benign foster parents, and finally discovered her true royal identity. When she returned to her parents, she found that they were deathly ill. Therefore she confronted and triumphed over great suffering to search for her parents' magical cure. In the end, she succeeded in healing them and became an ideal type for female shamans. Pari Kongju took on an aggressive and adventurous role to confront suffering and serve her parents' needs. This behavior is more typically that of a Korean male, in particular the oldest son, who bears the heaviest responsibilities for filial piety. Thus, the princess took on a "male" role to overcome her plight of sexual discrimination. In the myth of Tan'gun Agassi, an unwed woman conceives sons after impregnation by a monk encountered in a dream. She is harshly punished by her nine brothers, but is later rescued by her sons, and is then elevated to the level of a procreation god. In both myths, which involve plots analogous to shamanic initiatory ordeals, a woman overcomes sexual oppression by means of appeal to a male role. In the first case, the woman herself fulfills a typically male heroic role; in the second case, the woman is rescued and divinized through the intervention of her sons.³⁹

Lee notes that the relationship between a shaman and her possessing spirit is nearly always contrasexual; in the case of the female *mudang*, her "spirit master" is a male, which is viewed as a *yang* entity entering a *yin* entity. This image fits with the *I Ching* representation of *yang* as a solid line (like a phallus) and *yin* as an open line (like a vagina). The term for union between spirit and shaman is *sin-i t'anda*, which literally means placement of the spirit over the shaman's body. During the period of *sinbyōng*, the shaman recruit is completely exhausted by dis-

ruptions and is made vulnerable to spirit intrusions. Her completely receptive state is called a "half dead or small dead" condition. At her formal initiation ritual (*naerim-kut*), the shaman opens herself in complete receptivity. The spirit enters with the shaman's full acceptance, resulting in a peak experience transcending even the orgasm of ordinary human couplings.⁴⁰ Lee points out that *sinbyōng* symptoms are similar to "love-sickness" which also includes withdrawal and gastrointestinal maladies.

After presenting three cases of *sinbyōng*, Lee concludes that the shaman recruits all suffered from repression of sexual desire due to unwanted or frustrating marital relations. The shaman takes cold water as an important aspect of sacred diet and offers water to spirits in round bowls. This water symbolizes both fertility and potent medicine. It unifies the concepts of sexual fulfillment, procreation, purification, healing, renewal, and regeneration for shamans.⁴¹ Religiously significant dreams occurring during the initiatory period utilize symbolism of ecstatic sexual union between shamans and their contrasexual spirit partners, albeit often in sublimated guise. The spirit and shaman also exchange gifts signifying their matrimonial tie. This conjugal bond may well exclude sexual relations between the shaman and her human spouse. So the shaman is removed from ordinary human relations into a partnership with spirits, and thereby experiences her own transformation and partial deification. The establishment of a voluntary marital relationship with a spirit results in the cure of possession-induced initiatory afflictions. Significantly, *sinbyōng*, which is akin to love-sickness, is cured by sexual union with a male spirit (for a female shaman)—that is, repressed libido is released and reintegrated after initiation so that the shaman can reestablish personal and social order at a higher level of satisfaction and status as a healer of other peoples' afflictions. Lee recognizes three phases in the release of repression for shamans: "...sexual repression or social repression of sexual desire,

sexual liberation due to ecstatic sexual union with the divine in dreams or in fantasy, and sexual reintegration in real life through the formal ritual of initiation."⁴²

It should be noted that this repression, liberation, and reintegration of libido is not exclusively sexual in nature. Sexuality is one aspect of libido. This libido release process mobilizes not only the sexual drive, but also the urge to nurture, create, and heal (generativity, as Erik Erikson defines it) and the urge to spiritually mature by means of the bringing together of opposites into wholes as part of the individuation process (the transcendent function, as defined by Carl Jung).⁴³

It is useful to compare the perspectives of Youngsook Kim Harvey and Jung Young Lee regarding *sinbyōng*. I have already referred to Harvey's study of the socialization of six female shamans. The original report was contained in her Ph.D. dissertation. In her subsequent book, Harvey brings together some conclusions relevant to this discussion; she interprets *sinbyōng* as a pathway out of impasse.⁴⁴ Harvey found that all six shamans demonstrated above average intelligence, abilities, and physical attractiveness. These shared attributes may significantly contribute to the successful resolution of *sinbyōng* crises and the assumption of the shamanic role. She also found that the shamans all had experienced pre-initiatory conflicts between their self-concept and the domestic roles forced upon them by circumstances. They all had difficulty reconciling social expectations of women together with their own individual interests. They were also very sensitive to cultural inconsistencies, hypocritical behaviors, and their own personal injustice as oppressed women. This sensitivity became highly magnified in their ensuing experiences of unbidden *sinbyōng* suffering and the social abuses directed toward them as a result of *sinbyōng* and shamanizing. *Sinbyōng* was the most significant category of experience in their lives. It enabled them to:

...make the transition from being helpless housewives trapped in the impasse of a double

bind to being shamans who transcend the natural (culturally defined) limits of being a woman, who have economic autonomy, and who have clear professional identities in the larger society.⁴⁵

Sinbyōng lasts as long as necessary to compel acceptance of the shamanic calling or else it destroys the resisting shaman recruit. Since the initiatory possession is involuntary and fated, the recruit is without personal blame. Yet she can choose to accept the call, thereby relieving herself and her significant others from disastrous retributions by spirits. The recruit's family also is provided an opportunity by *sinbyōng* crises to display altruism by supporting the recruit's acceptance of the shamanic role despite the impending ostracism and stigmatization they will likely incur.

It is a common belief that the *maūm* (heart, mind) is weakened or fractured by personal tragedies and exploitation, thus making the person susceptible to spirit intrusion. Therefore, the recruit's significant others may become morally obligated to assist her in assuming the shamanic role; otherwise they may be seen as contributors to her unfortunate distress. By helping the recruit to become a shaman, relatives may fulfill their obligations in an apparently altruistic manner so that both the recruit and they themselves are relieved from attack by spirits. *Sinbyōng* mobilizes strenuous problem-solving efforts on behalf of the recruit, resulting in the transformation of familial roles into a new structure more acceptable to all concerned. The possessing spirits, who are often patrilineal ancestors, form an insurmountable coalition with the shaman, who is their only direct spokesperson. Thus the combined wills of the spirits and the shaman prevail in the family to extricate the shaman from an intolerable pattern of relationships, transforming the pattern into more favorable configurations, and then stabilizing and maintaining the new power/status/role pattern. Thus, Harvey says, the oppressed women turn the table on the oppressors in a face-saving, blame-free

manner. Of course, the success of this technique requires the significant others' belief in the underpinning world view and the power of spirits. Otherwise, family members can reject or coerce the shaman recruit, foiling this social transformation process, and quite possibly bringing disaster upon the recruit and themselves.⁴⁶

After the formal initiation ritual, the spirits and the shaman establish a mutually rewarding transactional relationship which takes precedence over all other relationships, even that between husband and wife. In this way, the successful resolution of the social transformation process and the *sinbyōng* crisis is strongly protected. The Korean folk view emphasizes that, preliminary to this successful assumption of the shamanic role, "...experience of disorder of some form is an essential feature in the recruitment of a shaman."⁴⁷ Further, this disorder must be overcome and the resulting relationship between spirit and shaman must be carefully maintained in a life-long bond, like that of a marriage. In sum, Harvey clearly points out the social dimension of the *sinbyōng* transformation process: the successful resolution of role conflicts in the family. This social dimension of reconciling conflicting role expectations (self-conceived and other-conceived) is the social correlate of the psychological reconciliation of opposites which Lee observes as the release of repressed libido in shaman-spirit marriages.

The anthropologist Laurel Kendall points out another type of reconciliation which occurs through assumption of the shamanic role.⁴⁸ Kendall says that Korean shamanic rituals blend both women's self-esteem and shame. Shamanism in general and the emotional behaviors in *kut* are deprecated in contemporary Korean culture. At the same time, *kut* generate culturally valued religious and therapeutic experiences so shamans and participants derive heightened self-esteem from them. Kendall says that a *kut* trans-

forms the contradiction of women's public powerlessness and deprecation and their private domestic strength and respect into high drama and therapy. Taking into consideration the various perspectives reviewed in this chapter, one can see a reconciliation and balance of many contraries which is accomplished through a person's transformation into a *mudang*: esteem/shame, male/female, *yang/yin*, order/disorder, health/sickness, sacred/profane, other/self. The outcome of this transformation is not merely personal benefit. The shaman becomes a servant of the sacred for her community and the entire cosmos.

Thus the therapeutic transformation, effected by the onset and resolution of *sinbyōng* disorders, involves the person in a total and drastic manner. The successful shaman is fundamentally changed for the better: in body, with dissipation of gastrointestinal and other maladies; in mind, with the release of libidinous creative energy and the resolution of emotional conflicts; in social relations, with the readjustment of familial and economic roles; and in spirit, with the firmly established alliance with sacred powers, with a socially important religious role as healer, and with personal access to a profound and elating sense of meaning and significance. In fact, this healing of the shaman does not occur in a piecemeal fashion through therapeutic interventions directed at supposedly discrete and dichotomized parts of the person. This is neither medical intervention, psychotherapy, nor even psychosocial therapy in the narrow senses of these terms. Initiatory transformation is a healing of the whole person through drastic experiences which encompass and engage the whole person. Even the dichotomies between sickness and health and disorder and order are transcended. For, as we have seen, sickness and disorder and health and reordering are integral facets of the complete transformation process.⁴⁹

NOTES

1. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series, no. 76 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Princeton/Bollingen Paperback, 1972), p. 8.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
3. For a more detailed discussion of *san sin*, see: Edward R. Canda, "The Korean Mountain Spirit," *Korea Journal*, vol. 20, no. 9 (September 1980), pp. 11-16.
4. Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 265.
5. The name *hananim* may be derived from words meaning "honorable heaven" or "honorable one." He is so supreme that he apparently transcends the proximate focus of Korean shamanism. In contrast, Korean Christianity has tended to both universalize and personalize the concept of *hananim*. See Donald Dean Owens, "Korean Shamanism: Its Components, Context, and Functions" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1975), pp. 68-71. Lee suggests that the proximate focus of Korea shamanism may represent a deterioration from an ancient *hananim* centered religion. See Jung Young Lee, *Korean Shamanistic Rituals* (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981), pp. 17-26. Lee's view concords with Eliade's postulation of a general trend in the history of shamanistic religions toward the mythological recession of supreme beings from human affairs. See Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 505-506.
6. Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 13-14.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-31.
8. Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), p. 2.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
11. Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Peyote Hunt* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 94 and following chapter.
12. Knud Rasmussen, *Across Arctic America, Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition*, trans. W.E. Calvert (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969. Reprint. New York: Putnam, 1927), p. 81, quoted in Joan Halifax, Ph.D., *Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Dutton Paperback, 1979), p. 6.
13. Personal Communication, Professor Yu Sŭng-guk, Sung Kyun-kwan University, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 1976.
14. Natalie Curtis, *The Indian's Book* (New York: Harper and Row, 1907), pp. 38-39, quoted in Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, p. 8.
15. Rasmussen, *Arctic America*, pp. 85-86, quoted in Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, pp. 9-10.
16. Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, pp. 14-15.
17. In a significant refinement of diagnoses, the American Psychiatric Association has recently acknowledged a distinction between religious experiences and psychoses. This is exemplified by the statement: "Beliefs or experiences of members of religious or other subcultural groups may be difficult to distinguish from delusions or hallucinations. When such experiences are shared and accepted by a subcultural group they should not be considered evidence of psychosis." Robert L. Spitzer, M.D., et al., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd edition (Washington D.C.: The American Psychiatric Association, 1980), p. 188. This distinction may be of value in refining Korean psychiatric diagnoses as well. For example, *sinbyŏng* has been labelled a culture-bound depersonalization syndrome occurring in the context of psychopathology. See Suk C. Chung, M.D., and Kwang-ŭl Kim, M.D., "Psychiatry in South Korea," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 130, no. 6 (June 1973), p. 669.
18. Stephen Larsen, *The Shaman's Doorway: Opening the Mythic Imagination to Contemporary Consciousness* (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Colophon Books, 1976), pp. 60-61 and 80.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 64 and 18.
20. I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 188.
21. For a detailed discussion of the formation of Korean shamanism, see Lee, *Korean Shamanistic Rituals*, pp. 1-26 passim. Also see Owens, "Korean Shamanism," pp. 1-47 passim.
22. A gold crown with jade pendants from Old Silla (ca. 5th century) has tree and antler shaped projections which may reflect Siberian shamanistic prototypes. Exhibition Catalog, "5,000 Years of Korean Art," National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 1979, p. 152. Since

- 534, kings of the Silla and United Silla kingdoms (57 B.C. to 935 A.D.) patronized the Hwarang "Flower Boys" order of discipline which had shamanistic affiliations. See Marshall R. Pihl, "Korea in the Bardic Tradition: *P'ansori* as an Oral Art," *Korean Studies Forum*, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1977), pp. 60-61.
23. Youngsook Kim Harvey, "Korean Mudang: Socialization Experiences of Six Female Shamans" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1976), p. 437. Feminine pronouns shall be used to refer to Korean shamans generically since the most numerous and powerful shamans in Korea are female. This study by Harvey is intrinsically fascinating and full of insight. In addition, it provides rich biographical data suitable for various analyses which augment Harvey's own approach. Accordingly, I have reinterpreted her material with a comparative religious approach.
 24. *Ibid.*, pp. 213, 175. *Mansin* literally means "ten thousand spirits." It is used with a geomymic prefix as an honorific manner of addressing shamans. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
 25. Laurel Kendall, "Caught Between Ancestors and Spirits: Field Report of a Korean Mansin's Healing Kut," *Korea Journal*, vol. 17, no. 8 (August 1977), p. 9. Also see the discussion of *sinhyöng* in: Kim T'ae-gon, "Components of Korean Shamanism," *Korea Journal*, vol. 12, no. 12 (December 1972), pp. 17-25.
 26. Harvey, "Korean Mudang," p. 209.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
 28. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
 30. *Ibid.*, pp. 281, 285.
 31. *Ibid.*, pp. 383 and 96.
 32. Owens, "Korean Shamanism," pp. 260-261, 207-208.
 33. Kim T'ae-gon, "Shamanism in the Seoul Area," *Korea Journal*, vol. 18, no. 6 (June 1978), pp. 40-41.
 34. Harvey, "Korean Mudang," pp. 328-335 passim.
 35. *Ibid.*, pp. 271-274.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
 37. Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. xi-xii.
 38. Lee, *Korean Shamanistic Rituals*, pp. 167-185 passim.
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
 40. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
 41. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
 42. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
 43. Erikson postulates a developmental crisis of generativity versus stagnation which typically occurs during mid-life when a person examines accomplishments and life patterns and calls them into question. The outcome of this crisis may be higher levels of productivity and creativity (generativity) or despair and stagnation. However, the urge for creative production may be seen to emerge earlier in life, as well. For discussion of such a crisis in a religious context, see Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., The Norton Library, 1962), pp. 243, 260. Jung uses the term "transcendent function" to describe the psycho-unconscious material, often symbolized and experienced as the resolution of opposites. This process is especially active in transference, dreams, fantasies, and religious visions. It can yield creativity, insight and aesthetic productions. The transcendent function may be especially pronounced during mid-life. See Carl G. Jung, "The Transcendent Function," *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), pp. 273-300 passim.
 44. Youngsook Kim Harvey, *Six Korean Women: The Socialization of Shamans* (St. Paul: West Publishing, American Ethnological Society Monograph, no. 65, 1979), pp. 235-240.
 45. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
 46. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
 47. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
 48. Laurel Kendall, "Suspect Saviors of Korean Hearths and Homes," *Asia*, vol. 3, no. 1 (May/June 1980), pp. 12-47.
 49. This article is adapted from two theses: Edward R. Canda, "The Tiger and the Shaman: Mastery of Sacred Power in Korea" (M.A. thesis, University of Denver, 1979) and "Therapeutic Transformation: A Transcultural Model for Clinical Social Work" (M.S.W. thesis, The Ohio State University, 1982).