

Discursive Formation around “Shinto” in Colonial Korea

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Introduction

In the current discourse, Shinto is usually categorized as a national religion. The discourse of Shinto as the national religion, however, is a product of history; it became dominant only after the defeat of Japan in the Asian-Pacific War in 1945. When Japan lost its colonies throughout East and Southeast Asia, many Japanese thought to return to the idea of a “nation” state. At the same time, they forgot their own discourse of Shinto as an imperial religion, that is, as a world religion belonging to the same category of Christianity and Buddhism. This discourse had functioned to legitimize the invasion of Asia. In this essay, I have no intention to evaluate which discourse—national religion or world religion?—is appropriate or desirable for the characterization of Shinto. Indeed, the categories of national religion and world religion represent a dichotomy that was produced in modern period. My goal, rather, is to recover and rethink the forgotten discourse of Shinto as a world religion; in so doing, we have the opportunity to dislocate these dichotomous categories and investigate their contents. In what follows, then, I trace the development of the discourse about religion among Japanese intellectuals from the early 20th century through the 1940s, in relation to the Japanese imperial conquests, first of Korea (sections I and II), then of the entire Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere (section III).

I. The Concept of “Religion” in Colonial Korea

In the Korean Peninsula, it is said that the Korean word 宗教 (Jonggyo), translated from the English word “religion,” first appeared in newspapers in 1883. While the concept of “religion,” then, was transplanted to the Korean Peninsula before the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, if we take into account the fact that the peninsula was under Japan’s strong political and cultural influence ever since it opened Korea’s doors by force in 1876, we can see that this translation already was Korea’s response to the cultural and social changes in Japan. The Korean Peninsula was in the process of a twisted modernization through westernization as mediated by Japan. Both the dichotomy of religion/morality and religion/superstition were products of the imbalanced discourse formation in the transplantation of religion from Japan to Korea.

The transplantation of religious concepts, however, should not be seen simply as a story of linguistic concepts. The examination on how religious concepts related to other concepts and how they were located in the coordinate space of discourse requires us to put them into the political context of the day. Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910 was certainly a path-breaking event for the discourse of Japan-Korea’s common ancestry. Ryuzo Torii, an anthropologist from the Imperial University of Tokyo who was rooted in this discourse, asserted that the folk religions of both Japan and Korea could be categorized together under the heading Shamanism. Assertions like these helped to legitimize Japan’s annexation of Korea.

The tension between the Japanese emperor system and religion was

particularly important when Japanese colonial policy regarding Korea shifted, after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, from separation to assimilation. This shift had already started with the construction of the Chosen Shrine in 1925 by the Governor-General of Korea, which the Japanese government had established as their colonial government to rule the Korean peninsula; the Shrine's purpose was to make Korean people worship the Meiji emperor (the former Japanese emperor) alongside the Korean God. With the 1936 "Movement of Spiritual Field Exploitation," then, the aim was to cultivate the spirits of the Korean people in order to obey the authority of Japanese emperor; here, the Governor-General adopted a discourse of Religious Revival as the official policy, in order to proliferate Emperor ideology using the State Shinto system in Korean society. However, in doctrines like Choe Nam-seon's theory of 檀君 (Tan'gun; the legendary founder of Korean nation), which sought to relocate Tang'un's Shamanistic act as the origin of Shinto worship, the gesture of joining the emperor system and Shinto did not lead to the goal of assimilation to Japanese empire. Instead, Choe, a Korean intellectual, ran the risk of being himself assimilated, in his attempt to penetrate deeply into Japanese imperial ideology in order to transform its logic of orthodoxy and enhance the Koreans' civil right, while at the same time appropriating the discourse of the emperor system and Shinto by changing it from the inside under the disguise of assimilation.

Choe appropriated Torii's theory intentionally, in order to assert that the Tan'gun mythology found in the Korean race was central in Northeast Asia. Understandings like those of Choe and Torii, which stated that Shinto was not merely

a Japanese national religion, but rather part of a wide range of Northeast Asian religions and customs, were not rare in prewar Japanese society. This society didn't believe that Japan was a single nation state. Even before the annexation, in the middle of Meiji period, there was a paper entitled "Shinto as an Ancient Cult of Worshipping the Sky." It was written by Kunitake Kume, the well known historian and professor at the Imperial University of Tokyo. Kume's theory was absorbed in Japanese emperor-centrism. In contrast, in Choe's theory in the 1920s, the center was not Japan but Korea among Northeast Asian countries.

II. State Shinto as Imperial Ideology

It is necessary to take the relationship between Shinto and the emperor system into account. Religious freedom, as stated in Japanese imperial constitution, was formally guaranteed in the Korean Peninsula as long as it was compatible with the emperor system. In reality however, as in Japan proper, the colonial authority applied the political rhetoric that Shinto was not a religion but rather belonged to the realm of morality; this put the Koreans' religious freedom in constant danger. While in the beginning, the Shinto shrines built in different places in the colonies were claimed to be for Japanese settlers, this religious practice became violent after the outbreak of Pacific War, when the imperial authorities forced other people in the colonies to conduct Shinto worship as well.

The Governor-General of Korea also urged Koreans to worship at Shinto shrines voluntarily—from the bottom of their hearts—as part of the assimilation

policy. One of the assimilation policies of Shinto was the worship of the God of the land at the official local shrine in Korea. The cult of the God of the land began at Sapporo Shrine in Hokkaido in 1839, then expanded to Taiwan Shrine and Sakhalin Shrine in the Japanese colonies. The unique characteristic of the Korean case was the juxtaposition of the worship of the God of the land with the worship of Amaterasu Okami and Emperor Meiji in one shrine. The purpose of this juxtaposition was to represent “The Mythology of the Empire’s Inheritance” in modern colonial Korea. Amaterasu Okami and Emperor Meiji made one continuous line of the imperial family from mythological times to modern time, while the God of the land was seen to bring about the prosperity of Korean lands. In “the Mythology of Inheritance,” the God of the Korean lands passed on to the Japanese imperial family the sovereignty of his rule over Korean land. This was done voluntarily due to the great virtue of the imperial family as the descendant of Sun Goddess Amaterasu Okami. This was the typical narrative of the Japanese assimilation of Korea.

The person to provide such an interpretation of Japanese mythology was Katsuhiko Kakei, professor of the Imperial University of Tokyo, Faculty of Law. In Kakei’s consideration of colonial administration, Shinto ought to be a universal religion in order to sustain the expanding Japanese empire, and not merely a national religion (the view which eventually became common in postwar Japanese society). By his logic, Buddha and Jesus Christ also should be worshiped in Shinto Shrines as the Gods who ruled the lands of South Asia and of the West, under the reign of Japanese imperial family.

As I have just described, Kunitake Kume's theory that Shinto existed all over Northeast Asia, which had been argued in the pre-imperial Meiji period, was developed by Katsuhiko Kakei into a Shinto theory that sustained the Japanese empire as its main ideology in the Japanese annexation of Korea. It was in following this kind of Shinto discourse that, from the middle of 1930s, the Governor-General of Korea began the above-mentioned Shinto policy of putting one Shinto shrine in each village all over Korea. Here, Choe Nam-seon's theory also played a significant role. In his lecture "Indigenous belief in Korea" in 1936, he said the following to the Governor-General of Korea: "Ancient Shinto in Korea is almost the same as the Japanese mainland's Shinto because of the similarity between village festivals in Korea and Shinto shrines in Japan."

The original intention of Choe's theory in the 1920s was to shift the discourse from Shinto, centered around Japan, toward something like Shamanism, whose center was in Korea in Northeast Asia. But in the second half of the 1930s, his theory also became absorbed in the worship of Japanese emperor. When, under the pressure of the Movement of Spiritual Field Exploitation, Choe abandoned the term Shamanism and instead referred to the essence spread all over northeast Asia as "Shinto," his attempt could not avoid defeat in the hands of the Japanese emperor system.

However, regardless of Choe's personal defeat, his attempted definition of Shinto no doubt transformed the Japanese meaning of Shinto within the Korean context in at least two ways. First, as already we know, Shinto was thus defined as the universal religion, at least all over Northeast Asia, and became impossible to

define as a mere national religion unique only to the Japanese race. With that, Korean people began to worship many local gods who were formerly neglected because they were not affiliated with the Japanese imperial family. It could be described as the return of the expelled Gods to the Japanese main land.

Second, Shinto was reunified with Shamanism. The latter had been excluded in the Meiji period in order to redefine the Shinto Shrine as a public space of national morality—a definition based on the dichotomy of the religious and the secular. Consequently, Shinto shrines in Japan had lost their sense of religious passion; but in Korea it became possible for them to regain religious attribution.

Through these two points we observe a new concept of “religion” different from that of the Japanese. In Japan, Shinto was defined officially as public morality, against private religion as belief. In contrast, in Korea, Shinto could be a public religion, one that is full of the practices of everyday life. Obviously we have here the appropriation of concepts not only of Shinto but also of “religion” itself. If the Governor-General of Korea could not regain control over this appropriated situation, Japan’s administrative policy would be doomed to fail.

III. The Emergence of Religious Ethnology and the Theory of Overcoming Modernity

On the other hand, although the Governor-General of Korea constantly kept the policy of “the Shinto shrine as non-religious,” a few intellectuals felt apprehension with the idea of using Shinto—an idea within the realm of Japanese tradition—as the

ideological core for colonial governance. In the 1940s, they instead began to explore alternative discourses under which Asian people incorporated into the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere through the expansion of Asia Pacific War could voluntarily assimilate themselves into the Japanese empire. If Shinto might be a logically useful discourse in Colonial Korea, where the imperialists had insisted on the discourse of Japan-Korea's common ancestry, in the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, Shinto could not gain any stable status because even the Japanese imperialists recognized each country's political and cultural independence.

Although imperialism is essentially nothing more than a system of violent exploitation, since the governance of state power works more effectively by achieving the voluntary submission of the ruled, on the surface the Japanese colonial authority sought the consent of the colonized people. To this end, cultural ideologies functioned as an important arm of imperialism. Religious ethnology was one of them. With regard to the guiding role of "Japanese spirit" in the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, Japanese religious ethnologist Uno Enku deserves mention.

According to Uno, people under the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere all belonged to the culture of rice cultivation and ancestor worship, hence holding strong ethnic affinity with each other. The Japanese spirit, whose cultural foundation was different from monotheistic religions such as Christianity, was the preferable guiding principle. In this point, Uno thought that the discourse of Shinto, which was tied with the Japanese race alone, could not cover the entire Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, in which different races and states were to be united. Uno went

so far as to state that Japanese imperialists should recognize the fact that there existed diverse religions in the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere—religions like Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. He also sharply criticized the attempt to refer to the unified cultural name of this whole area as Shinto.

Kiyoto Furuno, a sociologist of religion, and Eichiro Ishida, an anthropologist, also opposed the enforcement of worship at Shinto Shrines for people under the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. But even for the discourse of ethnologists and anthropologists, the worship of the Japanese emperor was a key principle that the Japanese should teach to all the people living in the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. On this point, their conclusions were no different from those of Kakei and Choe.

During the Asia Pacific War, particularly in the 1940s, the idea of “overcoming modernity,” mainly advocated by philosophers in Kyoto School, started to emerge and fascinate intellectuals of that day. For instance, religious philosopher Nishitani Keiji, using the language of Kyoto School’s philosophy, criticized western religions as lacking the “‘absolute negation qua affirmation’ of humanity”; “as a result, culture and history became secularized and man could not free himself from faith.” As “the character of Eastern religiosity,” “the positionality of subjective nothingness,” Nishitani argued, could overcome this flaw.

Nishitani’s essay, written during the intensified Asia Pacific War, ended up beating the drum for the imperial system as horrible propaganda. The goal of his theory became to demand the absolute submission to the empire of not only the

colonized people, but also people in Japan proper. In relation to the theory of the “self-identity of absolute contradictions” advocated by Nishida, Nishitani only affirmed the part of “self-identity” and completely missed the opportunity to gaze “absolute contradictions.” From here, we can notice the intellectual corruption of Kyoto School since the middle of the War.

However, as young scholars in Korea and Japan have begun to unveil in recent years, while this theory, on the one hand, served as the Japanese empire’s ideological foundation in order to resist westernization, it was also, on the other hand, fraught with theoretical potentials to erode and overthrow the Japanese imperial rule from the inside. While the idea of forming the East Asian community based on the equality of Asian people only concluded with affirming Japanese imperial rule, Kyoto School thinkers, including Miki Kiyoshi on the left, and even Nishitani on the right, declared—however superficially—the necessity of co-existing with other ethnic states. If they failed to obtain the consent of the colonized, it was extremely difficult to maintain the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, which consisted of not only the Japanese but also of other racial groups. In fact, even if not directly based on Nishitani’s religious ideas, the theory of overcoming modernity provided the subjugated people in the Japanese empire, including those in the Korean Peninsula, “a logic of resistance through assimilation.”