Korean and Senegalese Diaspora Communities in the U.S.: The Role of Religion in Identity Formation

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Introduction

For the first new Korean Americans setting foot on the sugar plantations of Hawai'i in 1903, or for Senegalese immigrants such as the 1922 boxing champ Mbarick Fall who invigorated the culture of Harlem, the diaspora experience has been a far cry from that of their predecessors at Plymouth Rock 300 years before. These experiences have been no less instructive, though, as lessons in what a small immigrant community must do in order to organize itself within the large and diverse American context. A marker which both of these communities have found useful in settling in has been a particular form of religious identity, one which both enables access to a wider community as well as expressing a closely-held dimension of national culture from the homeland. As Clifford Geertz has argued for religion as a whole, these are indeed *models* of and *models for* one's existence in relation to a wider reality, ones exist not only as abstractions of the mind, but are folded into the practice of everyday life and social interaction. He states,

> "The comparative study of religion has always been plagued by...the elusiveness of its subject matter. The problem is not one of constructing definitions of religion.... It is a matter of discovering just what sorts of beliefs and practices support what sorts of faith under what sorts of conditions. Our problem, and it grows worse by the day, is not to define religion but to find it."[1]

Looking at the background conditions in which each immigrant community would find itself, we are obliged to begin with Weber: the

rationalization or 'disenchantment' of religion through the development of ascetic Protestantism, the elimination of magic as a means to salvation, and above all the integration of religious discipline into one's daily economic routine, have been observable throughout post-Reformation history and are cycles which are quite readily seen in the American context, to the extent that they influence the religious and economic identities of each incoming immigrant group, albeit with divergent results and particularities.[2]

In this paper, I will examine how these two immigrant communities have developed during their experience in the U.S., taking into account longitudinal data and general trends. My point of focus will be some of the predominant religious affiliations of each group; broadly Protestantism in the case of Korean Americans, including Presbyterian and Methodist traditions, and Islam in the case of Senegalese Americans. For both groups, there is an additional aspect. Although both Christianity and Islam are of course 'global' and 'monotheistic', there are uniquely nationalistic (and historically, anti-colonial) movements within these larger world religions. For the Koreans, particular features such as syncretism with Confucianism and Taoism, as well as the development of an indigenous movement known as Tonghak (or later, *Chŏndog'yo*), have been historically important. On the Senegalese side, *Mouride* brotherhoods within Islam, each devoted to an individual *Serigne*, have remained largely a unique feature of Senegalese culture although efforts have been made in recent years to expand this form of Islam beyond Senegal's borders.[3]

The Korean experience

The year 1903 witnessed the arrival of a group of 121 Koreans who had left the port of Inchon (known as Chemulp'o at the time), aboard the ship the *Gaelic*, to work on the sugar plantations in Hawai'i. This was the first Korean population group of any size to arrive, although other smaller groups and individuals, including ginseng merchants, had also begun to immigrate by this time. [4]

The reasons for the immigration during this brief period, which ended with Japanese colonization of Korea as a protectorate in 1905, stemmed directly from religious and economic factors. On the Korean

side, missionaries from the U.S. were actively working among a population which found itself distraught by natural disaster and other circumstances. According to Chang,[5] some of these missionaries were successful in efforts to promote immigration to Hawai'i, and were helped by Horace Allen, the American minister to Korea at the time. This aided the sugar plantation owners in two ways: first, it eased what periodic labor shortages may have occurred; but the second and probably more salient reason was to counteract the growing potential of facing a largely Japanese labor force that was becoming increasingly organized along lines of ethnicity.[6]

Within Korea, this period of history featured some major cultural shifts which were redefining the identity of the nation. These shifts were impacting religion and economic fortunes, as mentioned above, but carried overtones of national identity and political change as well. These were the waning years of the Chos_n dynasty, which had been in place for the 500 years preceding. Protestant missionaries had begun an active period in this area in 1884,[7] and the nationalist religion of *Tonghak* had sprung up from the teachings of Ch'oe Chaewu in the period of 1860 to 1864.[8]

Noh[9] characterizes Tonghak as it originated as "more than just a kind of syncretism…a part of creative and indigenous strategies and ways of life", that is, a form of religion unique to Korea and combining elements of Taoism, Maitreya Buddhism, Shamanism, and the revolutionary teachings of Maentze. Grayson[10] points out that there were borrowings from Catholicism and Protestant Christianity as well, although these elements were limited to relatively minor areas of terminology and architectural resemblance. While its later strands (*Ch'ŏndogyo* and, to a lesser extent, *Chungsandoga*) have embraced non-violence wholeheartedly, Tonghak as it was practiced initially advocated egalitarianism and the liberation of serfs to the point of taking up arms, as it did during the failed Tonghak Revolutionary War of 1894 to 1895.[11] This event helped precipitate the decline of Tonghak as a major force. At the same time, Tonghak along with other factors had brought about a disruption of traditional culture—it could be argued that Tonghak, as a syncretic religion based on egalitarianism, contributed significantly toward a notion of universal human rights in Asia in ways that the West still has difficulties in reaching.[12] For this point in time, however, it was the western religions

which took root as other religious traditions began to lose ground.

The pressures favoring outmigration at the beginning of the century were only intensified by the course that Korea's history took over the next fifty to seventy years. As Protestant denominations took hold, the adoption of westernized forms of religion both gave rise to and shaped the patterns by which traditional culture would find itself disrupted and changed. Obligations to tend the homeland gravesites of ancestors were relaxed, allowing outmigration to accelerate. Some observers have taken note that in the early postwar period, the extent to which western religion had been adopted seemed to be shaping political lives as well. Harrison notes, for example, of Kim Il Sung (whose father had been a Presbyterian elder):

> "The first statue of Kim erected in the North, Cumings writes, was unveiled on Christmas Day 1949, 'something that suggests a conscious attempt to present him as a secular Christ, or Christ substitute.'"[13]

Some have argued, by extension, that the North Korean government itself was modeled after the structure of the Presbyterian Church.

Meanwhile, the first president of independent postwar South Korea, Syngman Rhee, himself a Methodist, had been among the early immigrants to the U.S., having arrived in 1904 as a student.[14] Perhaps we can best encapsulate the Korean immigrant experience from his perspective: religion allowed him the freedom to leave, economics gave him somewhere to go, and politics necessitated his return, flying back as he did in 1948 in the airplane of General Douglas MacArthur.[15]

Postwar conditions led to the great increase in outmigration from Korea, not only to the U.S. but to many other countries as well, during the 1950's and 1960's. Mi Ja Kim[16] notes that from 1966 to 1970, an estimated $400 million was returned to the Korean homeland from immigrants working abroad in the form of remittances; this figure was roughly equal to the dollar value of Korea's exports in 1968. Thus, the economic benefits of immigration became clear within the span of the first couple of generations.

Religious communities, meanwhile, had been quickly established upon the arrival of each successive generation; these remained to a large extent in the culture and language of the home country, and were such a dominant feature of the immigrants' life that they attracted Koreans who held to no particular religious persuasion as well, as a means of expanding their social circle while retaining their national identity.

To a degree, the economic success which had been achieved through professionalism, education, and entrepreneurialism of the Koreans in the diaspora, allowed the establishment of new churches—denominations as well as congregations—to multiply with vigor. This proliferation was in part a result of internal church conflict, but also of the increasing population and aspirations of individual church leaders. More options became available to successive generations and many of those who were able to move to the suburbs did so. This trend toward suburbanization is well-illustrated in the case of Chicago by Kwang Chung Kim, Siyoung Park, and Jong Nam Choi, who note that by the time the 2000 census was taken, nearly three-quarters of Koreans had become suburbanites, while only a quarter remained urban.[17] Between 1990 and 2000, most Chicago townships had each lost over 100 Korean residents, most of them migrating to the northern and western suburbs.

Means of economic survival, in this new context, have arisen in ways that are perhaps not as dramatic as the development of kobonjil among the *Koryō Saram* of Stalinist Soviet Central Asia, but which are of interest nevertheless. In many ways, these forms of entrepreneurial activity correspond to and interact with religious participation, a feature which parallels the community which I will analyze in the next section of this paper.

The Senegalese experience

The population of Senegal is ninety percent Muslim. Islam, as it is practiced in Senegal, is grouped into different brotherhoods, or *confrèries*. These include Mouridism, Tidjianism, and Qadriyya, an order of the Sufi branch of Islam. Aside from Islam, there is a small Catholic population, and a very small number of Protestants and practitioners of beliefs which are strictly indigenous. Thus, it is Mourides who make up a plurality of

the population, and of Senegalese immigrants to other countries.

Islam was introduced to Senegal in different stages of its pre-colonial history. During the 11th century, Almoravid invaders swept in from the Saharan north and began conversions by force. The neighboring Mali Empire, which thrived around the 14th century, housed a center of learning and a library of Islamic manuscripts at Timbuktu, and carried an influence on the culture and economy of its neighbors, including not only the area now known as Senegal, but much of the rest of West Africa as well. The 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries witnessed the horrors of the slave trade, a time during which many of the pre-colonial empires were engaged in fighting each other, in part to obtain captives for sale. As the Almoravids had achieved conversion to Islam in the north through the Zawaya families of the Berber marabouts, so the Jakhanke clerics were finding converts to Islam in the south via more peaceful means; the Jakhanke were to have a major influence over turning the pre-colonial empires of the Fouta Jallon and Southern Rivers area toward Islam.[18] These empires included those of the Fulani warrior El Hadj Oumar Tall, as well as the Kaabu Empire of the Mandinka which he defeated at Kansala, in what is modern-day Guinea-Bissau.

Toward the latter half of the 19th century, around the same time as the Tonghak Revolutionary War was happening in Korea, the Mouride religious movement was beginning to coalesce, under the leadership of its founder, Cheikh Amadou Bamba. The movement encountered a great deal of resistance from the outside—attempts were made by the French to suppress it under their colonial rule of the region; they exiled Bamba twice. Because of its unorthodox way of interpreting Islamic practice, it has not to this day been recognized by the International Muslim League.[19] It was steadily taking hold, though, among the population, and part of the reason for this can be understood from an economic point of view. Although much of the religious order's activities had up to this point been based on agricultural work, there was an apparent trend toward trade in urban centers as early as the 1890's. Carter notes:

> "...commercial activities of the brotherhood and its members' involvement in petty trade date back to the earliest formation of urban satellite communities in Saint-Louis from about 1892....This

> marks what Cruise O'Brien and Coulon have designated the first phase of Mourid economic and commercial activity and migration toward urban centers." [20]

In subsequent decades, the commercial activity of the Mourides became stronger and more extensive. Large numbers of Senegalese were recruited by the French to serve in both World Wars, leading many of them to decide to seek immigration abroad after the end of the Second World War.

Beginning in the 1940's, the *da'ira* or religious school became more established within Senegalese urban communities as a central organizing institution for local Mouride groups. In conjunction with the increase in postwar outmigration, the establishment of *da'iras* abroad helped to settle new immigrants quickly into the host country. While taking up new jobs as street traders, in the manufacturing sector, or elsewhere in the host economy, immigrants could rely on the *da'ira* for the religious education and structure they sought for their children. In this way, the role of the modern Mouride trader, following a familiar pattern for immigration and integration, had become well-established by the 1960's, starting in France but quickly expanding to Germany, Spain, Italy and the U.S.[21] Efforts for further expansion, including proselytization of other nationalities, have been considered but have proven problematic due to the difficulty in 'disentangling' Mouridism from Senegalese national identity.

Conclusion

Immigrant experiences in the U.S. vary widely. On the surface, the differences which occur can seem to relate most directly to how easily the immigrant population is able to adapt and assimilate into the host community. Looking deeper, however, a more complete understanding is possible once we have considered the specific historical experience of each community on a comparative basis.

Similarly to the case of Tonghak, Mouridism can be seen as a syncretism of different traditions; both were also uniquely nationalistic in nature, as well as being largely anti-colonial. During the course of their parallel development, the 1890's were a critical turning point for both.

Whereas Tonghak sprang into a failed revolutionary movement, losing its potential yet never completely disappearing from the Korean religious landscape, Mouridism took a turn toward focusing on building its resilience through urban trade and influence over national politics, leading to the establishment of *dari'as* abroad and, eventually, increased outmigration. While the latter strategy may have worked to ensure the longevity of the movement, there would be limits to its success that were not to be encountered in the Korean example. The Korean immigrant experience grew from a liberation of social ties found in the Protestantism which had displaced Tonghak, while Mouridism was highly dependent on maintaining individual loyalty to a centralized *da'ira* community. In the former case, professionalization and suburbanization have occurred, while in the latter, urban concentration of the immigrant population has remained largely the case.

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Notes

[1] Geertz, 1971, p. 1.

[2] Weber, 1905.

[3] Ndiaye, *Ndigël*, 1990.

[4] See Kwang Chung Kim, forthcoming, pp. 1-6.

[5] Edward Taehan Chang, KKASB, 2000, pp. U6-U7.

[6] *Ibid.*, and Takaki, 1983.

[7] Clark, KKASB, 2004.

[8] Noh, KKASB, 2004.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Grayson, KKASB, 2004.

[11] Noh, op. cit., 2004.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Harrison, 2002, p. 17.

[14] Clark, KKASB, p. 91.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Kim, forthcoming.

[17] Kim, Park, and Choi, forthcoming.
[18] See Barry, 1998 and Sanneh, 1997.
[19] Carter, p. 59.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[21] Carter, p. 78.

Abstract

コリアン・ディアスポラとセネガル人ディアスポラ — 両社会を比較して

それぞれの離散コミュニティによって米国に移住・定住したパターンは大幅に異なるが、彼らの経験には多くの類似した要素がある。特に興味深いのは、宗教的伝統が共同体の独自性形成に果たした役割の程度ーそうでもしなければ決して宗教的伝統など信奉しないような共同体構成員にさえもーについてである。この論文では、米国に居住する韓国とセネガルの離散コミュニティ経験を比較しながら、そのような事例の根拠を考察する。