

*Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion*,  
by Laurel Kendall, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, xxviii+251p.

Laurel Kendall's latest book on Korean shamanism is an ethnographic tour-de-force that provides significant and nuanced theoretical insight into the ever-changing realm of shamanic practice in South Korea. Kendall has the remarkable vantage point of having spent nearly four decades living with, talking to, and learning from a large number of Korean shamans in the southern part of the peninsula. During this period, South Korea has undergone profound changes not only in the economic and political realms, but also in the social and religious realms. In seven engaging chapters, Kendall deftly weaves a complex narrative that explores aspects of this change and the flexible responses of the shamans and their clients to this shifting cultural terrain.

Kendall acknowledges early on the tension between the way things once were and the way things now are, and explores the seductive nature of cultural nostalgia while also delineating its theoretical pitfalls. The shamans she profiles recognize the productive and meaningful shifts in their practice engendered by the changes in the social, political and economic landscapes of Korea. From a folklorist's perspective, Kendall has put her fingers on the very pulse of the folkloric process in which meaningful cultural expression emerges from the dialectic tension between the individual and tradition. Here, the "tradition" of Korean shamanism is constantly reformulated by the shamans and their clients as they continue to engage the practice of shamanism as a meaning-making aspect of their spiritual lives.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of reading Kendall's book is the flash of recognition one experiences from having read her previous books and articles and having seen her documentary film on Korean shamans. Yet the book is much more than a simple "update" or "where are they now" account of these earlier ethnographic subjects. In several of the chapters, Kendall reexamines her earlier ethnographic accounts in the context of the changing contours of daily life in contemporary Korea, and recasts her earlier interpretations in light of the additional perspectives gleaned from later, additional fieldwork. In this manner, her theoretical engagement with the shamans recapitulates the same type of dynamic processes and accommodations to the shifting cultural terrain that

animates the shamans' practice. In other chapters, Kendall introduces new, compelling figures, and brings them into this broadening understanding of Korean shamanism.

After an excellent introduction, Kendall opens with a historical overview of the changing perceptions of "shamanism" in Korea, both in the academy and in the general population. She explores the political dimension of shamanism—a dimension that has been part of the study of shamanism since the earliest academic considerations of the phenomenon—and how shamanism in Korea has been deployed as a trope of national identity, often by competing groups. She also explores aspects of "nostalgia," and lays the foundation for the theoretical discussion of the cultural nostalgia that informs a great deal of scholarship and popular engagement with shamanism; this consideration of different types of nostalgia emerges as a leitmotif in later chapters.

The chapter, "Memory Horizons," brings us back to a memorable *kut* (shaman ritual) described in Kendall's now classic book, *Shamans, Housewives and Other Restless Spirits* (1985), and pairs it with a *kut* from 1992. This pairing is a productive one, and allows Kendall not only to explore aspects of performance but also to highlight some of the fundamental changes in performance context wrought by the rapid changes in Korean culture, not least of which is the break-neck urbanization that characterized Korea during those two intervening decades. As she writes, "The village house that I saw as both setting and symbol for the *kut*'s social universe survived only as a palimpsest" (62-63). The palimpsestic reading of what once was—here the changes in the man-made environment that erase the sociostructural elements of village life and by extension kinship ties—opens up a wide range of dense, overlapping theoretical issues. Kendall is not so much concerned with recovering this lost past, as many nostalgic cultural critics are, but rather is interested in tracing the mutually constitutive changes that are at play in the realm of Korean shamanic practice. Her goal is to understand how these accommodations allow shamans to continue to play meaningful roles in the spiritual lives of their clients, their clients' families and communities.

The third chapter revisits the failed shaman initiate Chini the reader may first have encountered in Kendall and Diana Lee's excellent documentary *An Initiation Kut for a Korean Shaman* (1991). The chapter provides important

contextual information for a deeper understanding of the documentary and offers a critical locus for the more descriptive nature of that film. More importantly, Kendall in this chapter reflects on aspects of performance in the context of shamanic practice. Her discussion of the tension between "true inspiration" and "pure performance" is fascinating, and one well worth considering in the context of a wide range of religious performances. The shamans' recognition of the performance elements of their rituals, and the failure of the initiate Chini to understand this component, add a complexity to the picture of Korean shamanic practice drawn by early scholarship.

"The Ambiguities of Becoming," the fourth chapter, interrogates the questions of who is a shaman in contemporary Korea and what constitutes shamanic practice. Kendall starts with revisiting some of the interesting back stories of shamans that she explored in great detail in *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman* (1988). She then goes on to discuss the considerable shift in the training regimen of Korean shamans, from the "traditional" spirit mother / spirit daughter apprenticeship to newer "commodified" versions of learning and teaching. Kendall ties her examination of the emerging shaman schools, such as the one run by the Spirit Worshippers' Anti-Communist Association, along with her discussion of handbooks of shamanic chants and rituals to an exploration of the tension that exists between spiritual practice and the clear economic component of (successful) shamanic practices. Her ethnographic explorations of the practices of three shamans—Minju's mother, the Fairy Maid, and Ms. Shin (a diviner rather than a shaman)—is one of the most successful segments of the book. She visits each of these women twice, with each visit spaced four to five years apart. The resulting narratives chronicle the changing fortunes of these women as the landscape of religious practice is buffeted by the rapid changes in the Korean economic landscape.

The fifth and sixth chapters of the book focus explicitly on the economic fortunes of the shamans and their clients in the context of an ever-increasing consumerism and the catastrophic failure of the Korean economy referred to colloquially as the "IMF crisis." In the first of these chapters, Kendall explores the relationship between shamanic practice and small scale entrepreneurial practice. She astutely observes that, "While the notion that Korean shaman rituals articulate the grievances of the oppressed *minjung* is compatible with a

historical narrative South Koreans tell about themselves, an active shamanic practice that grapples daily with business risks has left the *minjung* far behind" (152). The disconnect between scholars who see the shaman as expressing a *minjung* consciousness and the shamans whose clients are decidedly not *minjung* is an important consideration, and one often missing from academic discussions about Korean shamanism. The second of these chapters extends the exploration of the rapid changes in the Korean economy from a largely agricultural and manufacturing economy to a consumer-based economy. Here Kendall explores the increasing role of commodities tied to the global circulation of goods to shamanic ritual practice. Kendall notes that "Consumer goods become the substance of dramas of ambivalence, a site for both the celebration and satire of consumption as a paradox that many Koreans live with every day" (176). This notion of the "drama of ambivalence" extends well beyond the role of consumer goods in *kut* but nowhere is it more apparent.

In the final chapter, Kendall engages the role of place in the context of shaman practice. The shift from the rural house to the modern apartment complex was already raised in the opening chapters and in this chapter she expands on these concerns by interrogating the shifts in the location of ritual in a sustained and thought-provoking series of vignettes. The increasing popularity and necessity of shrine-based rituals is perhaps the most notable and profound of these changes, but one that does have historical precedent. Other vignettes include a discussion of the designation of historical shrines as sites of cultural heritage (Kuksadang), and an examination of pilgrimages to Mt. Paektu on the border of China and North Korea. Taken together, the chapters in this book offer a nearly comprehensive overview of the changing dynamics of shamanic practice in Korea. Perhaps the only thing missing is a chapter on Korean shamanic practice in the Korean diaspora; but that clearly lies far beyond the purview of this excellent book.

Kendall concludes, "My aim has been to show how the seemingly 'old-fashioned' sort of shamans I got to know during my first fieldwork, and some of their younger colleagues, effectively engage contemporary South Korean life" (206). Kendall more than succeeds in this task and this latest book will no doubt be an inspiration to younger anthropologists and folklorists eager to explore many of the changing phenomena that she has pointed to here. The work will be

a welcome addition to the library of any scholar of shamanism, religion, performance or Korea, and will doubtlessly find its way into many undergraduate and graduate courses in anthropology, folklore, religious studies, and Korean studies. It not only serves as an excellent companion to Kendall's earlier work but also opens new vistas onto shamanic practice in Korea.

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