



Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion*

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WHEN Laurel Kendall published her first book in 1985, *Shamans, Housewives and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life*, she provided readers of English for the first time with a detailed book-length account of the rituals of Korean shamans (*kut*) and the involvement of women in these rituals. Her focus on the latter implied that, unlike many Korean researchers writing about shamanic ritual at the time, she was not so much interested in the rituals as pieces of traditional folklore as in their social functions and context. Twenty-five years later, the book is still in print, and rightly so, because it is a highly readable and well-researched introduction to the subject. In the meantime, however, the Korea where Kendall did her first fieldwork in a village near Seoul in the 1970s has changed to a staggering degree. Until recently Korea was quite a poor country, where you never had to specify the brand of toothpaste you wanted because only one brand was on sale; now it is a thriving, largely urbanized, and highly brand-conscious consumer society, a member of the rich-man's club of the OECD, and the most highly-wired nation in the world.

The social context of *kut* has changed immensely, and one might assume that the “premodern” rituals of the shamans would have vanished together with the mom-and-pop stores that were the purveyors of Lucky toothpaste. But they have not, moving with the times, maintaining certain aspects of past practices while adapting to new circumstances and new demands in multifarious ways. Simultaneously, the social status of the shamans has changed. Often regarded as representatives of rank superstition in the past, at least some of them have gained public recognition as the proud keepers of authentic Korean traditions and many more are eager to prove themselves in this way. This is all part of the process of the adaptation of shamanic rituals that Laurel Kendall addresses in *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF*, which aims to describe the changes in the lives and practice of “shamans living inside South Korean modernity.” The book incorporates some material she published earlier in articles, but this has been reworked and carefully integrated into a new whole, which bears the hallmark of her very distinctive style: copious and fascinating ethnographic detail recounted with great flair, combined with a serious attention to theoretical perspectives. Another characteristic is a scrupulous reflexivity, a constant questioning of the role of the researcher in the processes she describes.

The book makes mincemeat of the notion that shamanic rituals are a vestige of the past rather than a constantly emerging phenomenon, fully part of Korea’s modernity. At the same time it is also critical of various forms of nostalgia, of the shamans themselves but also of researchers and folklorists who, while recognizing the changes, deplore them as a loss of authenticity. In essence, the latter assume that although it occurred, change should not have been allowed, ignoring that, as Kendall puts it, it is the shaman’s task not to maintain “tradition” but to “perform *kut* as a consequential transaction between humans, gods, and ancestors... to respond to the needs, desires, and anxieties of contemporary South Korean clients.” For Kendall, such nostalgia is, however, not just the target of criticism, but itself a consequence of the compressed modernity Korea has experienced. As a researcher who set out decades ago and has seen the losses that change has brought she also detects it in herself and critically engages with it, making it into a lens through which “the living and transforming shamanic practice” is studied.

Kendall is careful to point out that the book “makes no claim to a comprehensive statement about ‘Korean Shamans’ or ‘Korean religion.’” Her work is so rich that it is hardly fair to draw attention to anything that is missing. It is therefore not an objection against this book but a reflection on the implications of the views Kendall propounds if I mention one side of popular religion that virtually all researchers, myself included, have neglected in spite of Kendall’s insistence (which I fully share): this is that it is the practice on behalf of the clients that counts, and not the “authenticity” of the rituals. If this principle is strictly adhered to, the numerous shaman-like practitioners who have hardly mastered any of the lore traditionally associated with shamans (or none at all) should receive as much attention as their counterparts who have. Seduced by the attractions of the more traditional rituals, with their pictures, the music, the dancing, the singing, and the comic interludes, and admiring the artistry of certain shamans, we continue to direct most of our attention to practitioners who at least aspire to competence in this respect. This is

also what Kendall has done, although characteristically she is not insensitive to the issue; in her description of the shaman she calls the “Fairy Maid” she notes that the latter already had a flourishing practice before she had learned to perform *kut*, and she views the tendency to label some shamans as “phony” from a critical distance, making it an object of her analyses rather than following the many shamans and folklorists who do make such distinctions. Meanwhile the practitioners who are not able to perform to agreed standards pose a bit of a conundrum, at least to me. Laurel Kendall and other researchers have drawn attention to the authority shamans derive from the correct and aesthetically pleasing performance according to the rules of traditional shamanic lore. This is certainly the case. But it begs the question how shamanic practitioners who are deficient in this respect in many instances still manage to maintain a viable practice.

However this may be, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF* is a very successful follow-up to *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits*, showing that for all the changes, and sometimes losses, the shaman rituals have only gained in fascination. Kendall manages very well to convey the dynamism of the rituals, which not only manifests themselves in adaptive metamorphoses, but also in the liveliness and creativity of the internal dynamics that contribute to their efficacy. The book will also be very useful to those who are not necessarily interested in Korea but want to understand the place of ritual and popular religion in contemporary urban society in general, and the ways in which ritual actually does things.

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