ABOVE: The presiding monk (left), ritual transvestite (center), and another musician perform music for the shaman’s trance dance.

BELOW: Dressed in traditional garb, the principal sponsor of the Spirit Marriage Ritual prays before the altar.
Opening the Word-Gate:
The Innovative Style of a Korean Shaman

text by Nam-Chu Kang and Edward R. Canda
photographs by Edward R. Canda

Scholars generally classify South Korean shamans into two distinct types, the sesupmu and kangsinmu. Scholars often like to make a sharp contrast between the two types of Korean shamans, but in actual practice, many Korean shamans do not conform so neatly to the stereotypical roles that these categories imply.

In the southern region of Korea, where they are most common, a sesupmu ordinarily inherits her role from a family member. Because the sesupmu is not called by the spirits, the sesupmu shaman usually does not have a spirit partner as a guide and consequently lacks the power of fluent, spontaneous communication with spirits. Instead, the sesupmu typically relies on standardized rituals and a special spiritual conducting device—often a long bamboo pole—to summon the spirits.

In contrast, the northern kangsinmu usually receives a spontaneous call from the spirit world to become a shaman. She typically undergoes a period of initiatory sickness, known as sinpyong, during which she suffers erratic emotions, physical disorders, and unstable social relations. She also experiences unusual visions or other psychic phenomena. These disruptions shake her out of the previous life situation. This sickness can only be resolved through an initiation ritual, called sin naerim kut, led by a master shaman who functions as the initiate’s adopted shaman-mother and trainer in shamanic techniques.

In essence, the spirits deconstruct the initiate during sinpyong, and then the sin naerim kut reconstructs and dedicates the initiate as a medium of the sacred. The kangsinmu is therefore able to apply her understanding of suffering and its resolution to the aid of other people. The kangsinmu is regarded as the most powerful type of shaman, for she has a personal spirit guide and is able to commune with the spirit world through possession trance and soul travel.

The shaman Pak Jung-Suk, the subject of this article, is an excellent example of how a Korean shaman may be shaped by her spirits and circumstances in unexpected ways. At the time the authors met shaman Pak, in 1993, the sixty-year-old shaman had been providing spiritual support for many years to the residents of several coastal towns in the southern area around the city of Chungmu. Her shamanic practice serves many fishermen whose survival on the dangerous seas depends on the will of the ocean’s Dragon King.

Based upon shaman Pak’s favorable reputation, Nam-Chu Kang had been consulting with her regarding local shamanistic rituals as part of a research project documenting the oral traditions and folk life of people living on Korea’s southern coast and islands. In June of 1993, Kang graciously introduced Pak Yosa1 to Edward Canda, who was conducting research in the area under a Korea Foundation grant. We decided to join forces in order to document Pak Yosa’s innovative style of Korean shamanism.

Ms. Pak proved to be a highly articulate spokesperson and advocate for Korean shamanism. As she wished to promote the understanding and appreciation of her spiritual way, she agreed to tell us the story of how she became a shaman, and she invited us to attend and report on an unusual ritual—a Spirit Marriage—she was scheduled to perform. In addition to our group, she had invited a Korean Broadcasting Service crew from the southeastern coastal city of Pusan to record her performance.

The following day, shaman Pak met us and some other reporters at a local tea room, as arranged, and then took us to a house in a nearby residential area where she receives clients. We sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her spirit-honoring altar, which was festooned with bright decorations and offerings of food, incense, and water. The altar paintings included both Korean shamanic and Buddhist deities. Other walls of the room were decorated with other Buddhist paintings and shamanic paraphernalia, attesting to her syncretic Buddhist-shamanic style. While a tape recording of a Buddhist chant played in the background, Pak Yosa told us the story of how her mal mun, or “word-gate” of inspired speech and action, had been opened by the spirits.

A Life of Tribulation

Pak Jung-Suk was born in 1933 in the southern province of Kyongsang Namdo, during the Japanese occupation of Korea. When she was six years old, her family moved to Japan. The family was regarded as socially and educationally successful, and her brother studied at a university in Tokyo. However, Ms. Pak’s situation took an unexpected turn.

Pak Yosa traces the beginning of her spiritual calling to some emotionally distressing experiences that occurred during her junior high school period. She tells how, during the Allied bombing of Japan at the end of World War II, she became greatly frightened by her frequent exposure to dead bodies. She recalls vividly how one day, while she was out walking in Nagoya, a bomb raid forced her to take cover under a bridge. As she waited in fear and consternation under the bridge, she bowed and prayed that she and her family not be killed during the raid. She medi-
Holding wedding clothes and a paper inscribed with the ghost-bride's name, Pak Yosa serves as a surrogate bride during the first Spirit Marriage.

Pak Yosa relates that the bombing was so severe that her family's house was the only one left standing in the neighborhood. She felt it was a miracle that she and her family survived.

Pak Jung-Suk became sickly and began to suffer frequently from chest pains. Her family suspected that she might have a respiratory problem, but a medical examination at a hospital could find nothing wrong.

Pak Yosa recalls that she began to experience an abnormal fluctuation of body energy (ki un). In the mornings, after the sun rose, she would become lethargic and irritable. In early evenings, she would begin to feel revitalized; then, at night, she would actually feel energetic. She lost all interest in worldly affairs—even in her own life.

During her third year of junior high school, her family relationships became increasingly difficult as well. In preparation for Chusok (Harvest Thanksgiving Day), her mother decided to make Pak Jung-Suk a new school uniform. While they were shopping for fabric, the girl became fixated on some red and yellow cloth—she could see nothing else. She kept asking her mother to buy red cloth for the skirt and yellow cloth for the blouse to make a traditional Korean-style dress. However, her mother refused to comply, insisting that the girl needed a white blouse and black skirt—the standard uniform required at her school. Disappointed and angry at her mother's decision, Pak Jung-Suk stubbornly refused to leave her room for three whole days.

Pak Jung-Suk's relationship with her mother continued to deteriorate. Pak Yosa recalls that she started to hate her mother, feeling that she was intolerably bothersome. At one point, her mother had prepared some hanyak (literally, Chinese medicine) for her. For some reason, as soon as the girl saw the medicine bowl, she felt like throwing it away. She wouldn't even wear clothes washed by her mother. In general, she kept to herself. Usually, in the afternoons, she closed herself in her room.

The combination of her inexplicable illness and her peculiar behavior troubled her family, especially her paternal grandmother. Pak Yosa fondly recalls how her grandmother used to pray for her: first she would take a bath, then she would go to the food jar storage area in their home to offer prayer. Whenever her grandmother prayed, Ms. Pak would feel better for a time, but eventually her troubles would return. The grandmother even gave Pak Jung-Suk a new name, Bang Ja, and explained that if this name were carved on a large rock, it would guarantee her granddaughter a long life.²

Although Pak Jung-Suk knew she needed to study for school, she was continually being distracted by extraordinary feelings and thoughts. For example, whenever she walked along the streets and saw people, she would intuitively understand their situations and fates. Unfortunately, she didn't feel free to share her insights with other people. As she neared graduation from junior high, she developed a strong urge to leave home and go to a mountain, but her family prevented her from doing so. The more she was restricted from honoring her impulses, the greater her spiritual unrest became. The more frustrated she became, the more physical suffering and weight loss she experienced. After she entered high school, she was given another medical exam, but the doctors could not find any reason for her illness.

For a while, her parents thought that her strange behavior might be caused by boyfriend troubles. Because her father got along better with the girl than her mother did, he tried to talk with her. After saying that he cared deeply about her and would support her in any way possible, he spent two hours hinting at the possibility of boyfriend troubles. Pak Jung-Suk became increasingly frustrated at his indirect approach and ended the conversation by announcing that she didn't want to go to regular school anymore. Instead, she wanted to go to a Buddhist temple located near Mount Fuji, to study To, the sacred Way.³ She said that her fervent wish was...
to master the Way, so that she could heal people who could not be cured by regular physicians.

Unfortunately, her father was concerned that her choice of careers would dishonor the family's reputation, so he refused to allow her to follow her desires. Suspecting that she might be suffering from spirit possession, the father offered to arrange for a monk from a nearby temple to perform an exorcism on her. But she rejected his effort to control her. Furthermore, she made it clear that she didn't want to get married—despite her family's expectations. According to Pak Yosa, her family continued to oppress and mistreat her for many years.

Toward the end of the Korean War, in 1952, her family took Pak Jung-Suk and returned to Korea, eventually settling in Pusan. At the age of twenty-one, Pak succumbed to the pressure of her family and married an architect, but she never got along well with her new husband. In this same year, Pak's mother died in an automobile accident. This tragic death, coming only a few years after the death of her favorite grandmother, must have left Pak with little emotional support.

Pak Yosa relates that, soon after her marriage, she started being influenced by her grandmother's spirit. However, she dared not confide in her husband about her spiritual calling—he would not even permit her to erect a shrine honoring her grandmother and other spirits in their home. She began having more health problems, including severe stomach disease. She felt that this was punishment from the spirits for not following her calling to the Way.

After more than ten years of continual illness and struggle in a frustrating marriage, she finally convinced her family that she would eventually die if they didn't do something drastic to help. Finally, they agreed to allow her—at the age of thirty-six—to undergo a shamanic initiation ritual.

Opening the Word-Gate

Pak Yosa arranged to have a *sin naerim kut* while her husband was traveling out of town. Pak enlisted the help of two elderly women shamans from Chinhae city. Under their guidance, she picked the twenty-second day of the third lunar month to hold the ritual. They instructed her on how to prepare the banners, flowers, and other items needed for the ritual setting.

When the initiation day arrived, Pak Yosa set up a folding screen in the courtyard to demarcate the space for the ritual. She placed a large ceramic bowl filled with rice in the middle of the courtyard and then stood a ritual bamboo pole, known as *so nang dae*, upright in the rice bowl. This bamboo pole is a ritual device used in the southern regions to channel and direct the power of spirits. It is tied with many different-colored knotted cloth streamers. The knotted streamers symbolize the sufferings of the ritual participants and all humanity.

The two women teachers led the ritual. In keeping with Pak Yosa's blending of Buddhism and shamanism, she refers to her teachers as Grandmother *posal* (Bodhisattvas, or, in this context, Buddhist devotees). She asked them to teach her according to the principles of Buddhism. They played the drum and gong while Pak Jung-Suk sat quietly. To her surprise, she had a vision of thousands of people attending the ritual, as if it were a spectacular event.

The two *posal* opened the ritual by announcing that they were going to clean out the unclean. They began to purify the area by spreading around a mixture of yellow mud, red pepper, and charcoal. When one of the *posal* tried to cleanse Pak Jung-Suk in this way, she reacted authoritatively, ordering the woman not to touch her body, because she was already clean.

The two *posal* then began to pray over the food offerings. Pak Yosa relates that, at this moment, she felt that she was being guided by spirits. In an unusual move, she directed the *posal* to stop praying and to follow her instructions. She announced that her role was changing from that of follower to that of leader, and that the *posal* should carry out her directions. She told them, "Try to get rid of your old thoughts and accept the inspiration coming through me."

Leaving the *posal*, Pak Yosa went to a nearby stream to bathe. On returning, she stood in front of the bamboo pole and took hold of it. Within five minutes, she became extremely energized. She felt wonderful and began to dance with the pole. Although the pole was heavy and difficult to handle, she was able to move it deftly.
of the house—still holding the bamboo pole. From her rooftop pedestal, she proclaimed, "Since I was born into this world, I have had a desire to help the world. I want to achieve the authority of the sin (spirits)."

As she continued to dance on the roof, she became more energized and balanced the long pole on the palm of her hand. Finally, her "word-gate" began to open. The spirit of her deceased mother spoke through her, saying: "Child, my child, you have fulfilled my wishes. Now I will fulfill your wishes."

After this speech, Pak Yosa bowed to the four directions. Then, she jumped back down to the ground and continued to dance with the bamboo stick. Pak Yosa announced, "Honorable teachers, if you truly believe I am coming, then you know that I no longer need the knots in these streamers on the bamboo pole. Please untie them!"

So the posal untied the knots, signifying the resolution of Pak Yosa’s initiatory suffering. The possession signaled a reconciliation between Pak Yosa and her deceased mother, and the beginning of a new spiritual cooperation.

Inspired by her spirits, Pak Yosa announced that she should go immediately to a nearby mountain to greet and honor the san sin (Mountain Spirit), and then return home to finish the ritual. She and the two teachers climbed up the mountain to a waterfall. After arriving, the teachers tied the streamers onto the bamboo pole again. Again, Pak Yosa instructed that they be untied. Then, they prepared an offering table for the Mountain Spirit. After this, they put food out around the area, in order to feed the Mountain Spirit and the spirits of the ancestors.

Pak Yosa explains that she failed to contact the Mountain Spirit that day because her instructors had not adequately accompanied her with music or helped her to call in the spirit. If they had performed properly, then she would have been greatly energized, she would have been able to do extraordinary things, and her word-gate would have opened further to release inspired speech. Disappointed, she chided the posals, then directed that they return home to the sol p’an (ritual place).

Upon returning home, she stood in front of the sol p’an. With the help of her instructors, she now called on the spirits of her ancestors to find and bring down her mother’s spirit again. Unfortunately, the instructors again failed to do a satisfactory job. Instead of finding Pak Yosa’s mother, they brought in a hodgepodge of chap sin (mixed spirits).

Pak Yosa again scolded the teachers, "If you want to talk with kwi sin (spirits of the dead), you must communicate precisely. And then, even if you call in unrelated spirits, you need to send them back to their proper place respectfully and honorably."

At Pak Yosa’s suggestion, the instructors proceeded to make a kil bei (cloth road), as a connector to the spirit world, in order to send the spirits back to the World of Bliss (kuk nak sei kyei). Then Pak Yosa prayed strongly and took up the bamboo pole. She immediately felt a direct connection with the spirit world and became greatly energized. For the next four hours, she danced with the bamboo rod. She felt wonderful. According to her, "The whole world looked as if it was mine. My mind became so wide, it could encompass anything."

Eventually, she put the bamboo rod aside and sat down for awhile in meditation. Then, following the instructions of her mother’s spirit, she picked up some small bamboo branches in her hands and danced some more. Even though she had never formally learned how to do this style of dancing, the music and dance all fit together perfectly. She danced for thirty to forty minutes this way.

Following this ritual, Pak Yosa soon developed a reputation as a spirit-connected (t’ong sin) person. She was able to divine people’s situations, foretell their future, speak oracles from spirits, and perform ceremonies to help them. Thus, her long-frustrated desire to master the Way and to help other people was finally fulfilled.

A Spirit Marriage Ritual

After finishing the story of her shamanic calling, Pak Yosa gave us some background information on the Spirit Marriage ritual (yong hon kyul hon sik) that she would be performing the next day. She explained that when a person dies prematurely or unmarried, the spirit of the deceased may remain restless and discontented after death. When this happens, the ghost may bring suffering and misfortune to surviving family members. One way to bring the ghost peace in the afterlife—and to resolve the suffering of the living—is to perform a marriage ritual on behalf of the ghost.

Pak Yosa noted that the ritual she would be leading was designed to complete two spirit marriages. The first spirit marriage would be between the male sponsor, Mr. Kim (a pseudonym) and his first woman companion, who died before they were married. Mr. Kim himself had requested the ritual marriage in order to alleviate the suffering of his deceased companion, whose unresolved pain had brought misfortune on his current family. Interestingly, it was Mr. Kim’s present female companion (also not married) who had brought the problem of misfortune in their business and family life to Pak Yosa’s attention and had sought her help.

Shaman Pak had divined that the ghost
of Mr. Kim’s first companion was suffering from emotional pain (han), due to her dying before getting married. The negative influence of her unresolved suffering had bled into Mr. Kim’s new family situation. By conducting a spirit marriage between Mr. Kim and his first companion, the ghost’s suffering would be relieved and the family’s misfortune would dissipate. By helping the deceased, the living family members also would benefit.

Pak Yosa had determined that the family’s misfortunes were also related to a second set of ghosts, so she had arranged to perform a second spirit marriage ritual. The second set of ghosts had both died young under conditions that had made their spirits restless. The man—Mr. Kim’s younger brother—had died at the age of nineteen or twenty from a severe illness while living away from home. The woman had died around the age of sixteen, also from a serious illness, incurred under tragic family circumstances. Shaman Pak had deemed the man and the woman to be a good match because their ages and manner of death were similar, and because the two would have been about forty-two years of age, if they had still been alive. In addition, Korean astrology had confirmed their compatibility for marriage.

Pak Yosa discovered that each of their families had been experiencing misfortune which they felt could be caused by their loved one’s unresolved pain. Because the two sets of families were intertwined through the two untimely deaths, they agreed to allow Pak Yosa to perform the posthumous marriages.7

Pak Yosa emphasized that, although the general format of the spirit marriage ritual was dictated by custom, she adapts her performance according to circumstances and the direction of her guiding spirits. She explained that she did not have a detailed plan for the ritual, because when she performs, she becomes a medium under the direction of spirits. When a given ghost appears, she performs in a way that resolves its discontent and then sends the ghost to its proper afterlife destination. She would call the spirits and then do and speak as they directed her. For example, if a possessing spirit wanted to drink wine, then she would drink it. If the spirit wanted to sing, she would sing.

Pak Yosa explained that certain other adaptations to the traditional ritual would be made for practical reasons. She noted that the ritual was traditionally performed at night so that the ghosts could be released the following morning. Spirit marriages were formerly performed in traditional clothing and used straw effigy dolls to represent the bride and groom. In order to simplify and accommodate her ritual to modern life, Pak Yosa now performs it during the day. Rather than using straw effigies, she uses inscribed papers to represent the ghost mates. And she allows her clients to wear Western-style wedding clothes, rather than requiring traditional hanbok clothing.

Unbinding the Knots of Suffering

At around ten o’clock the next morning—as mist whipped over the nearby mountain ridges—we met Pak Yosa, her assistants, and the other participants at the designated ritual site, located on a fishing boat dock in a small cove. Early monsoon rain fell steadily. Throughout the ritual, a group of gulls flew overhead, circling, dipping down to the water, and rising again to the sky. One of the participants commented that the gulls seemed like spirits, coming and going.

In anticipation of the inclement weather, a tent had been erected to protect the altar place and musicians.8 However, there was only a small amount of sheltered space for dancing and other performance. Although fewer participants showed up than expected, some that did took shelter under the small tent and the space became crowded. The gusts of wind and rain would make it more difficult than usual for Pak Yosa to perform. Nevertheless, shaman Pak graciously accommodated herself to the circumstances, and apologized to us for any inconvenience.

Pak Yosa was accompanied by several elderly assistants. In accordance with her Buddhist-shamanic syncretism, she had engaged a seventy-six-year-old Buddhist monk to preside over the marriage procedures. The monk also doubled as a musician for the performances, playing a gwaenggwari, or high-pitched gong.

The second assistant, a seventy-two-year-old man, was a ritual transvestite.9 He accompanied Pak Yosa’s performance by playing the barrel drum (puk) and large gong (ch’ing). Throughout most of the ritual, he was dressed like a woman and wore makeup. During the portion of the ritual dedicated to entertaining the spirits, he wore a woman’s traditional dress, a wig, and heavy makeup. Thus dressed, he danced and sang, accompanied by other musicians and sometimes by Pak Yosa.

Another man, in his sixties, played the hourglass drum (changgo) and the conical oboe (tallari). A woman, perhaps in her fifties, assisted on the drums. The other participants—mostly relatives of the sponsors or shaman Pak—helped on an as-needed basis.

After the other preparations were completed, Pak Yosa opened the ceremony with a rite to sanctify the ritual place (pu chung kui) and then led a ritual (chung hon kui) to invite the relevant spirits to attend the two
marriages and to resolve the suffering of all involved.

First, the monk officiated at the marriage between Mr. Kim and his ghost-bride.¹⁰ For his part of the ritual, Mr. Kim dressed as a groom, while Pak Yosa dressed as his bride. At this point, Pak Yosa did not become possessed by the ghost-bride. Rather, she served as her surrogate in the marriage ritual, holding a paper which had the ghost-bride's name inscribed in Chinese characters. The monk guided the couple through procedures typical of an ordinary wedding and then announced that the marriage was completed. At its conclusion, Pak Yosa prayed that all the spirits of heaven and earth would help everyone involved to have a happy life.

Next, the monk presided over the second marriage, uniting the ghost-groom—Mr. Kim's deceased brother—with the second ghost-bride. Mr. Kim acted as a surrogate for his brother, holding another inscribed paper and a man's marriage clothing, while Pak Yosa held a paper with the ghost-bride's name and a wedding dress in order to serve as her surrogate. Each marriage ceremony included all the steps of a traditional wedding, but in abbreviated form.

Following the spirit marriages, Pak Yosa performed a series of possession trance dances to summon the relevant spirits and let them speak through her word-gate. This procedure allows the spirits to express their angst and also reaffirm positive connections with the living.

Holding small bamboo branches in each hand, Pak Yosa danced in front of the altar and around the perimeter of the ritual place. As the percussive music accelerated, rising in volume, Pak Yosa began to slip into a trance. As she called the spirits to come, she became possessed by a succession of spirits who spoke through her.

At one point, the ghost-groom spoke to his brother through Pak Yosa, crying, "Oh, my dear brother, I feel sadness because you are so poor and have no house or temple to go to!" Shaman Pak sang in consolation to the dead brother, "You will receive many gifts today! You will go to the Land of Bliss today!"

Pak Yosa occasionally changed costumes—a traditional method of invoking particular spirits—but she tended to become possessed unpredictably, not necessarily in accordance with the costume. At one point, she put on a man's hat, picked up a dried fish, and began to dance again. Although she was dressed to invoke a male spirit, the first ghost-bride possessed Pak Yosa and spoke. In the persona of the ghost-bride, the shaman hugged Mr. Kim's current companion and commiserated with her, saying, "You had a hard time to raise my babies." After dancing and drinking wine, the ghost-bride was cheered and sang, "Although I had lots of suffering, I received well today, so my suffering is resolved."

Then Pak Yosa took the bamboo branches over to the oldest tree in the area. She stroked the tree as a connector to the spirit world, whistled, and called for the spirits to come through it.

Following this, Pak Yosa honored the Dragon King of the ocean (yong wang) by playing the barrel drum and large gong, while her assistants set out food and other items on an offering place near the ocean, in front of the altar. This yong wang kut was conducted to maintain harmony between the coastal people and the sea, and to ensure the well-being of those whose lives depend on the ocean.

After a brief lunch break around one o'clock, the ritual resumed with Pak Yosa performing her specialty—trance dancing with the bamboo spirit pole. The spirit pole—about fifteen feet long and tied with red, yellow, blue, green, and white cloth streamers—had been erected near the tent. The colors represent the five directions of the universe and, as noted before, the knots in the streamers signify human suffering.

Starting at the altar and moving around the open area on the right side of the tent, Pak Yosa danced vigorously with the long bamboo pole. She carried the long pole over to the old tree, again brushing its branches and calling in the spirits. Then, returning to the altar site, she continued to dance and sing. At times, placing the pole's base on the ground, she swayed and sang. Sometimes she grasped the pole and danced around with rushing movements. At other times, she placed the pole's base in her open hand and attempted to balance the pole on her palm as she danced. Laden with branches and cloth streamers, the bamboo pole was top-heavy, making it exceedingly difficult to maneuver in the rain and monsoon winds. Despite these conditions, she was able to balance the pole briefly on her palm a few times. The shaman's success at balancing the pole is interpreted as a sign of the spirits' presence.

By the end of this performance, she had untied and unraveled the cloth streamers, signifying the release of suffering (salpūrī). Then, using the long bamboo pole as a broom, she swept all the pieces of cloth and bamboo into the ocean.

While Pak Yosa took a break from her strenuous performance, the musicians continued to play and entertain the spirits. For much of this segment, the transvestite performer danced and sang.

Having assuaged the suffering spirits—and entertained both the spirits and the human participants—Pak Yosa now prepared to send the spirits back to their proper abodes. She prayed to comfort the souls and to support the work of the spirit messengers (saja) who guide souls to Paradise, the Buddhist World of Bliss.

To help the spirits on their long journey, shaman Pak performed the Dragon Boat rite (yong son kut).¹¹ She stretched out a long white cloth. This cloth, held by an assistant at each end, would serve as the road to the spirit world. She placed offer-
lings inside of a paper dragon boat and slid it along the spirit path, sending the spirits back to the other world. Then, splitting the cloth in half at one end, she pushed herself down the length of the cloth, forcibly splitting the spirit path into two pieces. This ritual action signifies the severing of the bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Finally, Pak Yosa closed the ceremony by conducting a si sok kut, a ritual in which various offerings and paraphernalia were heaped in a pile next to the ocean and set ablaze. The burnt remains were finally scattered on the ocean, thus concluding the ritual at about four o’clock.

Conclusion

As is common with Korean shamans, Pak Yosa does not conform to traditional Korean gender-role expectations; but neither does she fit neatly into one of the two categories of Korean shamans. Like most southern area sesumnu shamans, she utilizes a spirit-invoking device, the bamboo pole, and performs some southern-style rituals, such as the Spirit Marriage ritual. Yet like the kangsinnmu, she underwent an initiatory spirit-possession illness, gained a spirit guide, and now can enter possession trance at will. However, even here, Pak Yosa does not fit the typical patterns of either type of shaman. Unlike most kangsinnmu—who typically have spirit guides of the opposite gender that relate to the shaman like a spouse—Pak Yosa usually invokes the spirit of her deceased mother as her principal spirit guide. She also works with the ghost of her favorite grandmother, who died at the age of eighty-nine.

Throughout her life, Pak Yosa has demonstrated an independent will and spirit. When, as an adolescent, she tried to resist the expectations of her family so that she could seek the Way to help the world, she exhibited a combination of personal will and independent thinking that was not typical of traditional Korean women raised in a family-centered patriarchal society. Later, during her shamanic initiation—when one would expect an initiate to be somewhat reticent and unsure—the spirits impelled her to take command and to rebuke the teachers for their inappropriate performance. Although the two posal who served as her sin mo (spirit mothers) at her initiation ritual should have continued to function as her formal teachers, Pak Yosa almost immediately became independent from them.

As a practicing shaman, Pak Yosa continues to show much independence in her style of performance. She has gone beyond blending Buddhist and shamanic elements—something that is quite common—to completely identifying with her Buddhist path while maintaining some shamanic rituals and techniques. She is also quite willing to adapt the form of a traditional ritual to suit the circumstances and the spontaneous direction of spirits. For example, during the Spirit Marriage ritual we observed, Pak Yosa adapted the traditional form to the exigencies of a given situation and the impromptu guidance of spirits. When a particular ghost descended into her body during possession trance, she would speak and act as they directed, even if they came to her unexpectedly and out of order.

In short, Pak Yosa’s life story and manner of practice illustrate that the conventions of family, society, and even shamanic custom may be subject to change by the creative discretion of shamans and the direction of their guiding spirits.

Notes

1) Yosa is a highly honorific term of address for an adult woman. In shaman Pak’s case, it is used as a term of respect for the shaman as a teacher, and avoids using the common Korean name for a shaman, mudang, which can connote low respect. Given her Buddhist affiliation, another acceptable title for Pak is posal, a term for a devotee of Buddhism.

2) The name Bang In, which literally means “faithful follower,” may have been inspired by a traditional Korean novel, Chiang Hwang Chuan, in which the main character has a servant named Bang Ja.

3) The term To, or Tao, or Way of Life, is often associated with Taoism, but it also means “spiritual path.”

4) This bamboo spirit pole is also called sin jang dar.

5) Offering food to spirits is a common Korean shamanic practice. Spreading food for the spirits of ancestors is called ko su lye. When food is offered in water, it is for yang wang, the Dragon King. When it is spread along the street, it is to cheer the chap sin (mixed spirits), who have nowhere else to go to get food.

6) Opening the word-gate (mal mun) means that the shaman has become possessed and channels the message from a spirit; such divination is called kongse. When this happens, the shaman may speak with spirit voices and make eerie sounds and whistling noises.

7) Most of the relatives of the second ghost-bride had already died, indicative of the great misfortune in their family. The surviving relatives asked not to be present at the ritual—or though they agreed to its performance—because they had become Catholic and felt uncomfortable participating in a shamanic ritual.

8) Shelters are often used for shaman rituals held outdoors. In the summer, the tent protects food from hot sunlight; in winter, it provides shelter from wind. Participants are also occasionally sheltered by the tents. Sometimes, when a performance is held at a graveside in the mountains, a tree or large rock may be used for shelter. When weather is pleasant in spring or autumn, the ritual may be performed in an open area.

9) Ritual transvestism is a common practice in Korean shamanism. The shaman’s possessing spirits are often of the opposite gender from the shaman. When invoking the spirit, the shaman will don the gender-appropriate costume of the spirit and, when possessed, express mannerisms appropriate to the spirit’s gender. However, since this musician entertainer is not a shaman, his case is unusual. He grew up near a school that taught traditional music and dance to professional women entertainers (gisang), and has adopted their mannerisms in his own performance. In response to our questions, he did not explain his reasons for this.

10) In the authors’ experience, Spirit Marriage between living and deceased persons is very rare. Although the first author has observed many south coast shaman rituals, he has never seen evidence of this before. Also, in keeping with the unique practice of shaman Pak, the order and names of the ritual activities did not conform to either the more commonly described shamanic rituals of the Seoul area or the typical Spirit Marriage ritual of the Namhae southern coastal area.

11) Offerings included flowers and glittery things. This kind of offering may be related to the Buddhist belief that the World of Bliss is full of flowers and beauty. Thus, in order to go there, one should be adorned with beauty and decoration.

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