

Technology Incorporation and the Question of Authenticity in Contemporary Korean Shamanistic Rituals

While shamanism has been labeled an archaic technique, it is still widely practiced in South Korea, where contemporary shamanistic practices include long *kut* rituals, in which specialists employ trance-possession techniques in order to invite gods and spirits to communicate with humans. The longstanding stigma of a Korean shaman (*mudang*) is of an uneducated lower-class woman. However, with the increase in social mobility and women's general educational attainment, shamans no longer fit the image of social outcasts. On the contrary, many practitioners of this ancient religion have become producers of large scale staged rituals assisted by the latest technological innovations, such as voice amplifying, video art, media coverage, and Internet promotion.

In this contemporary reality, the question whether a ritual can maintain its authenticity is often debated by spectators and scholars. In South Korea, the government's program for preserving intangible cultural heritage requires constant evaluation of rituals. Only a few selected *kut* are designated and sponsored, and very few apt shamans receive the title "ritual holders" (preservers). In the process of their recommendation for designation, Korean scholars look for possible deviations from texts of documented historic performances, for performance competence, for consistency in a performing group's work, and for public reputation. Interestingly, the incorporation of new technological devices and practices has not been considered an impediment to authenticity, and staged performances receive academic and official support.

This paper will present the innovative aspects of contemporary shamanistic ritual in South Korea, and will offer a few optional perspectives to discuss the question of their authenticity

About the Author

In January 2010, I handed my dissertation titled *Objects of Worship: Material Culture in the Production of Shamanic Rituals in South Korea* to Indiana University, Bloomington, where I studied towards a double major in Folklore and in East Asian Languages and Cultures. In my research I outlined many changes in contemporary shamanic rituals in Korea, and discussed mainly the material aspects of their preparation, promotion, and representation on stage, in the media, and inside museums. My Master's thesis in The Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University discussed the nightly ritual of *Tikkun Hatzot*, performed near saint graves in Israel. Before that, I studied in The Interdisciplinary Program for Outstanding Students of Tel Aviv University, where I learned the basics of anthropology, performance, ritual, ethnographic filming, and Asian cultures. In the past two years I have

been affiliated with the Department of East Asian Studies at Tel Aviv University, where I teach about the cultures of Korea and Japan.