

SHAMANS, NOSTALGIAS, AND THE IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion. By **Laurel Kendall**. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. xxviii, 251 pp. (B&W Photos.) US\$49.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-8248-3343-5.

Shamans, Nostalgias and the IMF is a *tour-de-force* of cultural specificity, narrative sophistication and historical insight which *Pacific Affairs* readers, as well as folk religion specialists, will find timely and even prophetic, if we pay close attention. Kendall's account is most remarkable for capturing the last quarter century of Korean development history, while relying almost solely on the prognostications and performances of a handful of spirit mediums. They are her interlocutors and it is they who tell of the rise of Korean capitalism and the pains of the IMF. Their story of the Asian Financial Crisis, or the "IMF Crisis," as Koreans like to think of it, foretells a deep uncertainty, much like that which unnerved much of the rest of the world ten years later in the wake of the global financial crisis.

Tracing the evolution of Korean shamanist practices over the past three decades through her own first-hand ethnographic fieldwork, each subsequent chapter brings us closer to the present. She begins this account in the late 1970s when shamanism was disparaged as superstitious in South Korea and then moves forward to the late 1980s when it came to be praised for its authenticity and was embraced as a "religion" and a fundamental part of Korean culture. This shift came about as the result of Korea's democratization and *Minjung* movements, which sought to strengthen Korean tradition and give voice to the downtrodden. These movements spawned a cultural revival which gave new life and meaning to shaman practices, which gained respectability and prestige precisely because these practices represented the downtrodden, while the financing of them relied increasingly on the upwardly mobile, rather than the downtrodden.

Beginning in the 1990s, Korean shaman practices, which earlier had been focused on curing illness and appeasing restless spirits, then aimed at calming market volatility and ensuring business prosperity among those whose difficulties had become enmeshed in a national and global economy. Shaman deities and practices, like almost everything else in South Korea, were reshaped by commoditization and capitalization. Korean spirits began demanding imported whiskey and chocolates and *kut* performances became costly endeavours that became out of reach for most ordinary Koreans. Through this transition, shaman practices became much "narrower," mainly due to the high cost of sponsoring *kut*.

Kendall adamantly resists representing Korean shamanism, *per se*, but nevertheless, has a great deal to say about its current state. She mainly seeks to speak for the shamans who are her informants and friends. Hers is an intimate and empathetic account of shaman rites, practices

and logics, without any sensationalism or sentimentalism—no doubt, a result of her decades-long associations with them. Her subjects bear no resemblance to caricatures or composite characters; they are women who use raw emotion to convey spiritual insight. In capturing them and their condition, she brings out their humanity, and the humanity of lived ritual tradition.

Her central concern is the confluence of the forces of modernity, political economy and Korean shamanist practice, as they have converged, elided and eluded each other. Kendall presents Korea as a place where modernity and “magicality” coexist in creative tension—not in opposition, as Max Weber and many of our contemporaries would have it. It is a context where changes in one give rise to new possibilities for the other. Kendall makes clear that the political economy is not acting unilaterally on shaman practices, nor are these practices merely responding defensively to forces that threaten them. She thus gives agency to shamans and their practices. Shamans are active agents, who make the most of change as it unfolds, and are not helpless or passive victims of modernity or capitalism. As Kendall puts it,

“religion,” “spirit possession” and “shamanism” are not dead or fixed categories but mobile instruments of popular consciousness that respond to the “particular realities” of politics and economics, sometimes on a global scale (152).

This is not to say that there is no tension within Korean ritual tradition. Chini’s case is sadly quite telling—mostly because the difficulties she has performing her initiation *kut*. She has all of the requisite credentials to be a shaman initiate (a troubled background, a history of psychological illness, and close encounters with restless spirits), but she struggles to channel the spirits. She is meek, timid and always unsure of herself. She loses composure and goes out of character. To be one with the spirits, there is no room for self-doubt or circumspection. Mostly, she lacks gravitas, which is so evident in all of the seasoned professionals who coach her. We are given to suspect that Chini is not alone in this—that her difficulties (doubt, lack of confidence, childishness) may be symptoms of her generation. She is clearly having trouble measuring up to the high demands of their calling and, I might add, so are others. In any case, the practice is clearly in trouble if we are relying on Chini for what’s to come.

Even the older time-tested practitioners express urgency over their practices, because the ever-shifting social landscape perpetually threatens the moorings of social and cosmological order. The surplus of shaman practitioners has been met with charges that many of them are “phony” or “insufficiently inspired or badly trained” (110) and “are only in it

for the money" (111). Kendall notes that incompetence poses a threat to both shamans and clients. For some, the mountains just don't have the same power to give inspiration anymore. Yet, as Kendall puts it, "if urban development has reduced sacred terrain, cars and good highways have expanded the shamans' access to sacred sites within South Korea" (xxviii). In Korea, powerful cosmological forces hang in the balance. The stakes are high, and high drama is the business of these shamans.

Most notable perhaps is Kendall's seamless integration of 30 years of fieldwork and research into a meaningful, and almost timeless, narrative. Her book will be an invaluable source for students and scholars of globalization and folk religion in Korea and throughout the greater Pacific.

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PRIMITIVE SELVES: Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910-1945. *Colonialisms*, 5. By E. Taylor Atkins. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. xv, 262 pp. (Figures.) US\$24.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-520-26674-2.

Primitive Selves offers a meticulously documented and nuanced analysis of the history of Japanese colonial fascination with Korea and its postcolonial legacies. In a compellingly unfolding narrative, E. Taylor Atkins examines the significance of the extent to which the Japanese colonizers were concerned with "Koreana" (exotic yet strangely familiar relics of colonial culture) in an impressively wide array of fields from folklore, museum collections, architecture, archaeology, art exhibitions, popular and folk music and dance, among others. The book contends that the Japanese imperial propensity to catalogue, preserve and document aspects of colonial Korean culture was much more pervasive and complex than given credit in previous (postcolonial) Korean historiography. Previous postcolonial scholarship, according to Atkins, has largely taken a nationalistic perspective limited to the imperialist focus on the colony's exotic and primordial difference in order to control, devalue and ultimately to obliterate and assimilate colonial culture. Atkins suggests, however, that there may have been other motives, "less diabolical," at work, often ambivalent, even contradictory in the imperial Japanese gaze on Korea. Aligned with recent contributions made in "new imperial studies," Atkins argues that the empire was not always unitary or coherent but, in fact, fragmentary and at times self-contradictory.

This study pays attention to many contending players from Japan, such as government officials, curators, collectors and scholars, whose motives were not always aligned with one another or that of broader imperial policies. Despite the structural unevenness of coloniality that