PHOTO BY YENA BAE

The author with Korean **mudang** *Keum Hwa Kim*

The Shamanic Heritage of a Korean Mudang

Text and photos by Cheryl Pallant

As our plane descends over South Korea, the first thing that catches my eye is a series of strange white stalagmites. It's no wonder—in my sleepless daze, the result of a twenty-five-hour flight in economy class with several layovers, things appear somewhat otherworldly. I perceive large groupings of apartment complexes, about twenty stories high, as organic growths sprouting up from the earth.

I've come to South Korea to teach writing, dance, and American culture for a year at Keimyung University in Daegu, about 150 miles south of Seoul. While here, I hope to explore Korean culture and transcend the common Western understanding of the country as an electronics superpower and a site where American soldiers sacrificed their lives in an attempt to stop communism.

Knowing that Korea has a few thousand years of cultural continuity intrigues me. Korea is so different from the United States, which, aside from Native Americans, is a country of migrants who combine the traditions of their heritage with new customs acquired in a foreign land. I want to understand shamanism, not as an appropriated practice but as an indigenous one with a long history. I also hope to gain understanding into my own numerous numinous experiences—waking visions, lucid dreams, urgent voices, and inexplicable intuitions. These experiences puzzle me, even when they are later validated, as when I listened to a voice that told me to go into the woods to be of assistance to someone, and ended up saving a woman who was being raped and strangled.

Though I have been devoted to the practice of yoga, Zen meditation, and various sacred dance forms, I have discounted my own numinous experiences over the years as flukes. Indoctrinated in scientific materialism, I need an explanation that affirms the substantiality of my experiences and points out a path towards their replication. Having witnessed too many religious groups foment divisiveness and hate, I am critical of religions and cynical of spirituality. But I am also admittedly contradictory—both a seeker of spiritual practices and one who keeps them at a distance. I regard my body as a temple of worship, yet I remain hesitant to cross the threshold and frequently keep the door locked.

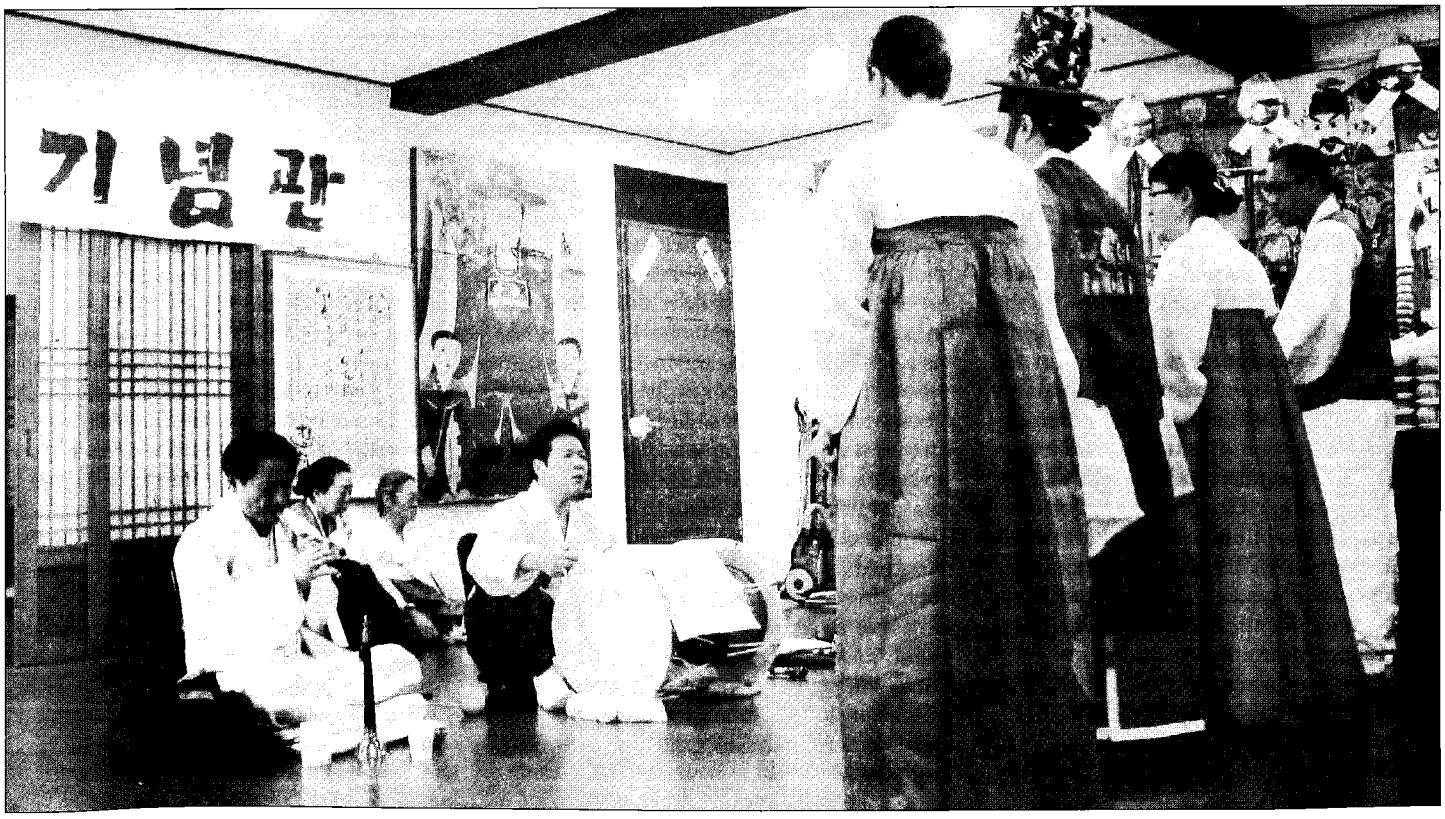
Here in Korea, a fellow dance professor, Hyonok, has agreed to accompany me on a trip to meet one of the most powerful *mudangs* (shamans) of the country, Keum Hwa Kim. Ms. Kim, born in 1931 in Yumbek, in the Hwanghae Province of North Korea, has been recognized by the South Korean government as a living national treasure. I buy my train ticket, unsure what to expect.

On the eve of our departure, Hyonok learns she has to attend a meeting at the university in the morning. Her unexpected meeting means I must travel solo, undertaking a seven-hour trip that includes a subway, high-speed KTX train, bus, and taxi.

Ms. Kim's retreat center is situated on an island, Kwanghwa Do, about thirty-eight miles northwest of Seoul and a few miles from the demilitarized zone (DMZ). She chose the island because it was the closest she could get to where Dangun, a central character in the country's creation story, descended from the heavens to the Taebuk Mountains in North Korea. It's also the closest Ms. Kim can get to her birth place, which is on the other side of the DMZ—the world's most heavily guarded border, about 2.5 miles wide and 151 miles long, with barbed wire separating north from south.

The center, perched on the side of a small mountain in a rural area, is a two-story neotraditional building constructed of brick and wood, with a tiled roof, sliding doors, and heated floors. It was built using donations given to Ms. Kim over many years of service. Her clients vary greatly: teachers, business people, farmers, housewives, and parents with sick children. All of these seek her assistance in reversing bad luck, gaining insights, curing illnesses, or clearing land or buildings of negative energy.

ABOVE: *Offerings of foods cover Ms. Kim's altar, which is dedicated to the various spirit deities that she incorporates.*
BELOW: *Traditional Korean musicians support the singing and dancing of the* **mudangs**, *who don costumes to summon the spirits.*



Ms. Kim's niece, He Gyung Kim, shoulders a set of large knives used during ceremonies.

Ms. Kim is one of about 300,000 *mudangs* in a country of about 50 million people, a third of whom live in Seoul. About ninety percent of Korea's *mudangs* are women, and the male *mudangs* mostly dwell in Cheju Island to the south. That the profession is mainly practiced by women is no coincidence. Scholars today offer differing conclusions as to whether men or women originally dominated the profession, but the first historical account of a *mudang* dates back to 19 B.C., when the king of Koguryo requested a healing. Buddhism arrived about four hundred years later, followed by Taoism in the seventh century; both traditions have influenced but never supplanted the shamanic practitioners of the region.

Everything changed, and the profession clearly became associated with women, with the arrival of Confucianism in the thirteenth century, during the Yi Dynasty, whose successors remained in power for five hundred years. Confucianism is patrilineal and patrilocal, and it has strict guidelines that determine status and behavior, based on age, gender, and profession. Not only did men hold the government jobs and other positions of authority, but all rituals centered on them. Women held subordinate roles, serving the needs of their husbands, raising their families, and preparing and cleaning up after meals.

Shamanism, associated with the realm of nature—which was deemed of lesser importance than culture and ideas, the domain of men—was pushed from the public sphere. Women embraced shamanic practices as a source of power and an expansion of their domestic duties, as the *mudangs* focused on rituals aimed at restoring the health of family or community members. This role continues to this day, with *mudangs* acting as counselors, healers, confidantes, and ceremonial leaders. Their beneficent and oracular presences are also sought after at the ground breaking for new homes and businesses, and the planting and harvesting of crops.

Ms. Kim originally had no intention of becoming a *mudang*, but her destiny seems to have been unavoidable. To spare her from the fate of serving as a "comfort woman" to the Japanese who occupied the country, her mother quickly married her at age fourteen to a boy a few years older from a nearby village. She went to live with her young husband's family, who treated her as a servant. The mother-in-law often beat her, as punishment for faulty knitting and cooking skills. After several months, fearing for her life, she ran away and returned to her family. At the time, her village was plagued by typhoid, and within days, she, too, came down with the disease. She never returned to her in-laws' home, and they never inquired about her absence.

More and more frequently, she began exhibiting signs of *sinbyong*, the spiritual illness recognized in Korea as the call to a *mudang's* life. Most traditional Koreans—generally those who are now fifty and older—grew up alongside *mudangs* and believe that *sinbyong* seals a person's fate. To turn away from the calling sets a person up for a life of unrelenting illness and suffering.

As a young girl, Ms. Kim suffered from headaches, uncontrollable screaming bouts, tinnitus, frightening premonitions, and disconcerting visions. She regularly saw people riding a tiger through her village, and she was visited by spirits demanding she perform various tasks, such as planting flowers in a neighbor's yard or placing pictures of horses on a wall. She couldn't discern which of her visions were real and which mere fancy. Often, she roamed alone in the woods, speaking to trees and stones, preferring the peacefulness of nature over the taunts from fellow children.

Her grandmother, a *mudang* herself, had long recognized that her granddaughter had been chosen by the gods and that she had little choice but to be a *mudang*. Her parents had initially opposed the life of a *mudang* for their daughter, hoping that she would marry, raise a family, and lead a conventional life. Eventually, however, they yielded to the inevitability of her fate. Her grandmother escorted her to Jung Waltaepo, an important ceremony marking the first moon of the lunar year, which involves much dancing, chanting, and presenting of ritual food offerings to the spirits. There, as the presiding *mudang*, she shared chants and dances with her granddaughter, whose debilitating symptoms, for the first time in years, disappeared.

Because her grandmother's health was poor, Ms. Kim apprenticed herself to another *mudang* for the next eight years. During this period, she met and eventually married a widower, whose wife of six months had suddenly died. As the north increasingly aligned itself with communism, the two of them became refugees and moved south to Incheon, a short distance from Seoul.

During the Korean War, Ms. Kim's reputation as a shaman spread from her own village to those nearby, but not without first causing her great difficulties, as the following account shows. A soldier assigned to an administrative post contracted tuberculosis, and his health rapidly deteriorated. After he had started vomiting blood and had become unable to eat, fellow soldiers transported him back to his village and said their final farewells, as the disease had already claimed the lives of many men in their unit. A few neighbors convinced the soldier, now near death, to meet with Ms. Kim. As soon as they met, she foresaw his future and claimed he would not die, as long as he allowed her to perform a ritual for him. He agreed, but the fellow soldier

who learned about their meeting didn't believe in shamanism and were opposed to the ritual. They said they would kill her if she failed to cure him, but she conducted the ritual nonetheless. For two full days, she went without sleep and focused entirely on dancing and praying. On the third day, the man's appetite returned, and within a week, he fully recovered. Word of her curative powers spread. When the war ended, he became village chief and honored Ms. Kim in a special ceremony.

By the 1960s, South Korea was westernizing, and many signs of old Korea were being swept away to make room for industrialization and other forms of modernization. Shamanism, already a marginal practice, was further displaced. The military government prohibited its practice, and soldiers burned whatever shrines and ritual items they could find. When Christian missionaries and Jehovah's Witnesses arrived in the country, they further vilified the *mudangs* as witches and consorts of the devil. Some spread stories about the wicked nature of Ms. Kim, and many townspeople grew suspicious and avoided her. Her husband, unable to cope with the town's scorn, pled with her to give up her profession, but she was adamant about continuing the practice. Her refusal put tremendous pressure on their marriage, and he eventually had an affair and then left her.

By the 1970s, however, the Korean government, eager to preserve the country's heritage, had shifted its official position on *mudangs* and recognized them as "intangible cultural assets," since they preserved many traditional forms of clothing, music, and dance. To this day, the form and appearance of their *kuts* (rituals) has changed little. *Mudangs* wear *hanboks*, traditional embroidered silk clothes, and perform the same movements as did their ancestors. Musicians, too, play the same types of drums and wind instruments as their predecessors. Now that *mudangs* are considered invaluable to Korean identity, their status in society has improved.

Ms. Kim joined a few traditional dance groups during that era in order to learn classical Korean dance and improve her movement skills, and, in 1974, she won first place in a competition. The judges commented on her balance, poise, and power, and they mentioned her profession as a *mudang*. The competition was broadcast on television, and her popularity increased greatly as a result. She also traveled to the U.S. as a cultural delegate, and her dance and shamanic skills received widespread attention there.

Knowing her reputation, I have looked forward with great anticipation to meeting

He Gyung Kim holds the head of a cow sacrificed as an offering to appease angry spirits.

Ms. Kim. After hours of travel, I step out of my taxi at her retreat center to the sight of a dead pig in an aluminum pot, the sound of drumming, and a feeling of uncertainty about which of several doors to enter. The two-story center sits against a mountain and towers above an outdoor amphitheater with stone seating. A few cars are parked on the steep driveway, near a shrine building with paintings and statues of bodhisattvas. I climb the stone steps and remove my shoes, adding them to the lineup on the steps. Someone opens one of the doors to welcome me in.

Inside is a large hall with more than a dozen people standing around, wearing brightly colored *hanboks*. The *kut*, which began last night and which has been going on today for several hours prior to my arrival, has paused for a short break. At the far side of the room is a long counter stacked with food offerings such as mandarin oranges, apples, bananas, colorful rice cakes, *soju* (rice alcohol), and various sweets. A woman escorts me to a side room with a vanity, where Ms. Kim sits cross legged on the floor. She is tall and slender, and her hair, pulled back into a loose bun, is still black, although she is nearly eighty years old. Her face is etched from years of communications with spirits, separation from her family, and the struggles of a divided country that has survived disease, hunger, and military occupation.

"An yang haseyo" (hello), I say, one of about a dozen Korean phrases I know. I hand her a note from Hyonok that contains my introduction. She reads the note, looks at me, and, using gestures, invites me to sit with her for lunch.

I follow her back to the hall, now lined with tables. She motions for me to sit beside her, across from an elderly man with a gentle smile. Later, I learn the man is her ex-husband, whom she had not seen for nearly forty years. He remarried after leaving her, but bad luck plagued him; his second wife died prematurely, their two children estranged themselves from him, and his business failed. He blamed his misfortune on abandoning Ms. Kim, and returned about a year ago to receive her forgiveness. They have been devoted friends since.

The three of us eat in quiet, our chopsticks repeatedly crisscrossing the table to pluck mackerel, sea weed, *kimchee* (pickled cabbage), pickled radishes, and other foods from shared plates. Unable to finish her rice, she pushes her bowl toward her ex-husband for him to eat.

Mr. Cho, the head musician and drummer for the *kut*, squats beside me in a pale orange, naturally dyed cotton vest and matching pants, and introduces himself as Ms. Kim's spiritual son. In his late forties, Mr. Cho, when not accompanying Ms. Kim, works in Seoul as a film producer. He invites me upstairs to another sizeable hall, with a huge bay window overlooking the mountains.

At the far end of the room is Ms. Kim's personal altar. The wall is covered with

Carved wooden totem poles guard the steps to Ms. Kim's center, warding off demons.

colorful paintings personifying the spirits of her pantheon, those with whom she converses—mountains, animals, Buddha, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, Zeus, Confucian generals, and others. A variety of items used for *kuts*—bells, knives, and other objects—rest on a shelf, near three fur coats suspended on wall hooks.

I have been told there are four types of *kuts* that one can request: for communities, with an aim to increase the luck of all; for the initiation of novitiate *mudangs*; for fruitful harvests of fish, game, livestock, or produce; and for individuals, who may be sick or experiencing a run of bad luck. Today's ceremony has been requested by a Korean *mudang* who moved with her husband to Japan and subsequently lost her sense of purpose. Her intention is to gain insight into her next steps in life.

When we return downstairs, the main hall once again has been turned into a ritual space, and the *kut* is about to resume. Mr. Cho sits at one end of the room, next to several other musicians, mostly *mudangs* themselves. Mr. Cho plays an *anggu*, an hourglass-shaped drum tipped on its side, which is considered one of the most important Korean instruments. The other musicians play *buk*, a barrel drum; *taepyongso*, a high-pitched flared horn; *hyang-piri*, a bamboo flute; cymbals; and gongs.

The musicians take turns alternating between playing music and getting up to dance or chant. I lean against a wall to watch, unprepared for the explosion of sound about to rattle my body. Shrill horns, clanging cymbals, and an insistent drum beat shatter my usual calm. There's an urgency to the music, an insistence upon alertness, and the rhythm and volume quicken my energy. My heart pounds fast, as if I've drunk one cup of coffee too many.

Ms. Kim is joined by several fellow *mudangs* about her age, as well as a few young disciples. Together, they sing, dance, and assist each other in the numerous clothing changes of brightly colored robes, ornately brocaded belts, and hats—these costumes, together with ritual items such as knives and bells, are used to invite or to placate particular spirits. Within minutes of each costume change, the voice of the *mudang* or the quality of the dance changes to reflect the particular spirit that has been invited to embody the *mudang*.

My associate and translator, Hyonok, has not yet shown up. I could use her help in explaining what is taking place and translating the songs and spoken words. I'm on my own, trying to understand each act of the unfolding performance—the multicolored flag waved overhead, the knife thrown to the door by Ms. Kim, the dead pig stabbed by a fellow *mudang* and then skewered atop a large trident.

There are several breaks during the ceremony, and as I drink green tea during one, an elder *mudang* approaches me. "America?" she asks. I nod. "You very sensitive. Have *mudang* energy," she says with a smile, before walking away. During another break, I step outside to feel the warmth of sun on my skin and breathe the rural air, free of exhaust fumes. I walk down the driveway and over to the amphitheater, where two *janseung*, twelve-foot-high, carved wooden totem poles, stand as guardians, their fierce, painted faces intended to scare off demons.

Mr. Cho joins me. "The ceremony bores you?" he asks. He witnessed me go from sitting upright to sprawling on the floor. The retreat center, like most traditional Korean homes, has no chairs or couches, and hours of sitting on the floor pain my back.

"Not boring. My back is hurting."

"Your back?" he repeats.

"Yes."

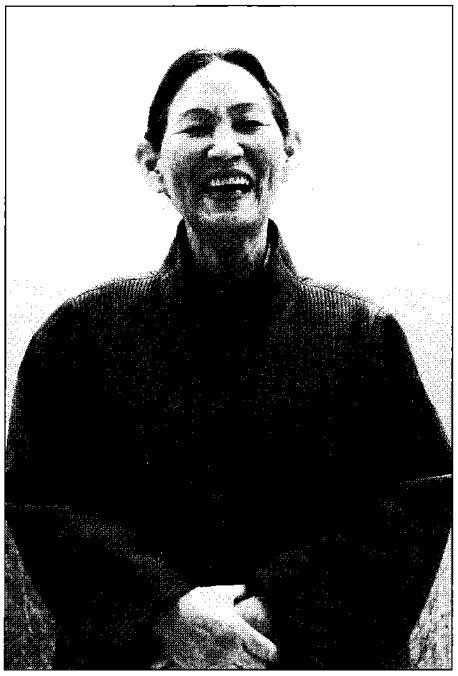
"You are resisting the spirits. Many *mudangs* feel it right here." He points to a spot on his back, the very place of my pain. A week earlier, while treating my scoliosis, a Korean acupuncturist had identified that spot, the place where my spine is most curved, as *yung dae*—an acupuncture point that, when blocked, produces asthma and a lack of spiritual faith, both of which have been part of my history.

Hyonok finally arrives in the early evening, tired from the trip. We take a short walk, and when we return to the center, Mr. Cho leads us to the upstairs hall, where we will all sleep. Everyone else has already spread out their bed rolls for the night, so I unroll mine, slip beneath the cover, and await sleep. It's possible that, during the night, spirits came and roamed the hall, but if they did, a ceaseless chorus of snores blanketed any audible evidence.

In the morning, before breakfast and the final sections of the *kut*, Hyonok and I join Ms. Kim and her ex-husband for her daily, hour-long walk, which takes us about a mile down the road. Along the way, we pass barbed wire fences enclosing what appear to be military buildings. Eventually, we reach a park with benches, where Ms. Kim stretches her legs and arms, and hits her back against a wooden pole to increase circulation. Hyonok and Ms. Kim's ex-husband get involved in an animated conversation in Korean that no one translates. When we return to the center, Hyonok announces that we have to leave immediately and provides no explanation. I learn later that he had advised her to talk to a lawyer about receiving money from her deceased husband, and she is eager to reach Seoul.

By midday, Hyonok and I have parted ways, she en route to a lawyer, me returning to my apartment, as confused as ever about the ritual. On a subway, I meet a seventy-five-year-old man, a retired dean of public administration from Yonsei University. He tells me about his experience as a soldier in the Korean War and thanks me, as a representative of the U.S., for our help. Suddenly, a man across from us bolts up from his seat and lets out a cry that gets everyone on the train staring. This man starts dancing in a way I've seen patients dance at a psychiatric clinic where I've worked. His eyes have that same distant gaze, and he strains to stay balanced as the train sways. He falls, then quickly gets up. Then he pulls my acquaintance from his seat to join him in dancing. Arms held high, they spin a few times before he grabs me for a threesome. He says in broken English: "She make Korea happy. She have light!"

This brings to mind an encounter I had about a year ago. While visiting my brother in California, I took a day trip to Pacific Beach in San Diego. As I strolled along the boardwalk, a man in his mid-eighties bicycled over to me. "I'm so happy to finally see you," he began. "I've been waiting more than half my life for you. I could see your glow from over there." He pointed to a burger stand on the boardwalk, several hundred feet away. "I would hug you, but then I wouldn't let you go." Over the next few months, I was approached by several other people, also telling me about my glow.



Ms. Kim retains her vigor, despite her age.

Once, I might have ignored the event on the train, but since my arrival in Korea, an increasing number of conspicuous synchronicities has led me to regard them as messages from the universe. Now, the exchange on the train leaves me shaken. When I find a cafe and settle down, I realize I need to return to Ms. Kim, to experience a *kut* from start to finish, accompanied by a reliable translator.

Several weeks later, I arrange through Mr. Cho to return to the center with one of my students, a young woman named Yena. Mr. Cho calls me at my office the day before the ceremony, and insists upon my coming sooner than I had planned, so that I will be there in time for the opening in the morning. Yena and I have only two hours until the train leaves.

Back at my apartment, I methodically pack clothes, notebook, camera, and extra batteries. Finished with time to spare, I sit on my bed. Unexpectedly, I begin to shake. It's a kind of nervous trembling, as if something big is about to take place. The reaction surprises me, since I'm not a client paying the equivalent of $5000 to $10,000 U.S. to learn what the spirits and my ancestors have to say. As an observer, my role is supposed to be much more passive. My shaking suggests, however, that my journey will be charged with meaning, something of a pilgrimage. Whatever its meaning will be, I certainly find my senses more alert.

Sure enough, this notion of a charged event is reinforced within an hour of my leaving the apartment. As Yena and I head up the escalator, away from the subway, a man sitting across from us begins to talk with her. He's a fortune teller, and he feels compelled to communicate his vision of me. He asks her to tell me that I'm a powerful woman, that my struggles of recent years have passed, and that good fortune awaits me. At the top of the escalator, I thank him for his words and ask Yena about the encounter.

"Do fortune tellers just come up to anyone to spontaneously give a prophecy?"

"It's happened to me a few times, but they usually are warning me about something bad. You're lucky. He said only good things." I wonder what compelled him to talk with me.

We meet Mr. Cho in Seoul, eat dinner together, and arrive at the center in time for bed. Yena and I are given a private room where we lay out our bed rolls. One of the *mudangs* comes in and suggests that we rearrange our beds in accordance with feng shui principles, with our heads facing north, in the direction of the kitchen, so that we don't lose energy out the door, through our feet. Though I prefer my head away from the doorway, I follow through on her suggestion. That night, I dream about attending a retreat to undergo a transformation.

Before the sun rises, Yena and I join Ms. Kim and her ex-husband on their morning walk. She has already completed her morning prayer to awaken her spirit body. These two-mile walks help ensure that her physical body remains invigorated. The two discuss today's client, and Ms. Kim's plans for the ceremony. More and more, she has been using her ex-husband as a sounding board as she determines a course of treatment for her clients. Usually, the spirits guide her during meditation and dance, both before and during the *kut*, but there are additional factors that must be considered in planning the treatment. For example, she consults the client's astrological chart ahead of time, to find auspicious days.

Once, years ago, a father brought his eight-year-old son to Ms. Kim. Every few days, the boy had been shivering uncontrollably, then falling unconscious. The father had taken him to numerous medical specialists, none of whom could determine a cause or treatment. Finally, one urged him to go to a *mudang*, and, reluctantly, the father phoned Ms. Kim. She knew the details of the son's condition before the father shared them. She told him that he had to follow her instructions exactly, and that the boy would get worse before he got better. She

Wearing a traditional robe, or **hanbok**, *Ms. Kim summons her spirit helpers at her altar.*

instructed the father to wrap a chicken in the boy's clothes. The father was also to cut the boy's hair and clip the nails on his toes and fingers, wrap the hair and nails in a cloth, and then give the boy a bath. He was also to prepare highly salted dishes for the boy to eat. She provided other instructions, all of which had to be carried out precisely and in a specific order, in order for them to work their magic.

After a few weeks, the father phoned to say that the boy showed no signs of improvement and that he was in the hospital unconscious. The attending doctor had said the boy would be dead within days. Ms. Kim told the father that the prognosis was wrong, but that he had to agree to a ceremony for the boy. The spirits would heal the boy, she insisted. While the boy lay in the hospital bed, oblivious to his surroundings, Ms. Kim danced and prayed at her center. The father called a few days later to report that nothing had changed with his son. Wait, urged Ms. Kim. Twenty days later, the boy awakened, and he never shivered or fell unconscious again. Ms. Kim explains that, if the father hadn't followed through on all of her suggestions, the result of the treatment might have been very different.

Today's client is not requesting relief from a terminal disease nor suffering from a condition that baffles doctors. A wealthy woman in her mid-thirties, she has great fears about the future for herself and her ten-year-old son. Her husband's business is failing, and he's got a mistress. She believes he will leave them destitute.

As Ms. Kim and her husband discuss the order of events, I offer to help in some way with the ceremony—something simple, perhaps dancing in an ensemble. During the last *kut*, I watched the *mudangs* and young disciples all shake their shoulders and heads in an ensemble dance—easy enough for me to do. When we return to the center, I help by cutting up pieces of white paper and twisting them around sticks to make flowers, which will be stuck in bowls of rice as offerings.

When it is time for the *kut* to begin, everyone meets outside briefly for the ringing of bells and the opening music. Once we have all ambled back inside, Ms. Kim sings a song that involves greeting the main door to the hall. She wears a red and white *hanbok*—red, a symbol of luck; white, a symbol of purity. Facing her altar, she summons her pantheon of helpers—animals, mountains, stars, generals, and children. Then she tosses a knife toward the door, the direction of its fall determining whether or not the *kut's* outcome will be good. When it lands, the blade points out the door, a sign I take as good, since no one seems alarmed. She balances atop a small *kimchee* pot, about a foot high, then lowers herself back to the ground, where she hops on one foot and then spins, all the while raising her arms. She rings bells, waves a multicolored flag to stir the energy in the room, and then sweeps the air with a fan painted with the images of three bodhisattvas.

The client clasps her hands together and bows toward Ms. Kim, who in turn bows before the main altar in the room. Ms. Kim then begins to twirl counterclockwise repeatedly and falls into what appears to be a slight trance, her eyes closed, her expression serene. Her movements are steady and apparently inwardly directed, although periodically she opens her eyes and looks at the musicians and the client. Her intent is to change the energy in the room, to gain insight into the client's life, and to summon spirits.

Suddenly, she stops dancing, and the music goes silent. She walks over to the client, who is sitting quietly on a cushion, and addresses the spirits—asking them sternly what troubles them and what they want. After a short silence, she tells the client there's no need to worry; all will turn out well. She will find comfort in her marriage again in a few years. Ms. Kim then faces the musicians, who start playing again, and all the *mudangs* join her in a group song.

Although some *kuts* last a few days, this one is scheduled to take only about nine hours. A program has been written on a piece of paper and taped to the *anggu* drum, where it is visible to participants, and it shows that there are twenty-four sections. Various sections pay homage to the sun, moon, and stars; animal spirits; holy people and other dignitaries; and family ancestors. *Mudangs* generally draw from thousands of spirits, but each *mudang* relies particularly on the assistance of a few dozen, who appear in dreams, during visions, and while the *mudang* is dancing or otherwise in trance. Despite a planned order to the ceremony, there is also room to improvise and to follow the promptings of the spirits.

The ceremony continues much as before, with fellow *mudangs* and disciples assuming key roles in the dances and channeling various spirits. Because of her age, Ms. Kim tires easily, and she relies on the help of others to enact various sections of the *kut*. Involving disciples in the dances is also a way of passing on the tradition. However, she has told me she worries that the comforts of modern Korea may prevent her disciples from making the sacrifices needed to open them to spirit energy. The prevalence of television and other amenities distracts them from practices—such as fasting, meditating, and dancing for hours—used to induce altered states of consciousness. She fears her knowledge and experience will die with her.

The *mudang* who dances after Ms. Kim wears a costume similar to hers, with a high hat and colored robe. After a brief dance,

she stops and changes her costume. Putting on a black mesh hat and sheer robe, she soon assumes the behavior of a Confucian dignitary. She stomps around the room, and the pitch of her voice becomes lower, so that she sounds like a man. Whether she is embodying a spirit or acting is not clear to me, but she begins speaking as a village chief long dead. She tells the client not to worry, explaining that the downturn in the husband's business is a result of the economic crisis. Then she adds that his infidelity is common male behavior and he won't abandon her or their son.

The *mudang* returns to dancing, spinning with shoulders high and taking large steps. She commands the space, both with the strength of her gestures and with a piecing gaze that seems intended for spirits only she sees. When she completes her section, the music stops and the ceremony takes an unexpected turn. Mr. Cho turns to me to ask, "Will you dance now?"

I walk to the center of the hall, expecting others to join me. No one does. One of the elder *mudangs* approaches, carrying a white robe and pointed hat. She helps me slip my arms into the sleeves, which extend several inches beyond my hands, and ties the hat in place.

"Do you know *gutkari*?" asks Mr. Cho.

"What?" I say, not knowing the word.

Somehow my answer satisfies him, and the musicians begin to play.

Unschooled in Korean shamanic dance, I don't know if a spirit is going to pursue me, or if I am supposed to solicit one. What moves do I make? How do I start? Years ago, I had a series of dreams about being in middle school, unable to remember what books were needed or where my locker or classroom was—a classic anxiety dream that resembles my discomfort now. I am exquisitely unprepared, my body cold and sluggish from hours of sitting. There's no opportunity to stretch or to envision my usual empowering images, which shift my attention away from the mundane.

Following the example of the *mudangs*, I bow three times to the altar. I turn to the four cardinal points, then look around the room at the paintings, welcoming the influence of each color and each stroke of paint. Trained in Contact Improvisation, sacred dance, and other improvisational forms, I'm accustomed to dancing without a plan, letting the environment influence my moves. I am not analyzing the symbols, only letting their imagery arouse me primally.

The music begins, and although the sounds are as raucous as before, it is now a welcome partner. I alternate between light and heavy steps, fill my sleeves with air, and take flight, spinning counterclockwise to stir the unconscious, then reversing direction for increased awareness. I step near the musicians, then away; step near the client, then away. Heat and energy permeate my body, as each breath determines movement. I am in familiar territory, deeply embodied, poised in the rawness of the moment. My natural inclination is to view the body as sacred and movement as a way to open energetic channels to commune with the divine. Eventually, I slow down and then halt, but the musicians continue. Taking their cue, I rev up again, following the en-

ABOVE: ***Slipping into a light trance, Ms. Kim waves colorful flags to stir the energy.***
BELOW: ***She sweeps the air with a fan decorated with images of her spirit helpers.***

PHOTO BY YENA BAE

Wearing a white robe and pointed hat, the author performs an improvised trance dance.

ergy moving into my muscles, the room a blur of dream and reality.

Lunch follows, and a few people thank me for my inspiring dance. Before I can process any of it, I'm told that Ms. Kim is ready for the interview I've requested. In the upstairs hall, we talk about her childhood and some of the incidents that led to her becoming a *mudang*, but then she turns the tables on me; she feels compelled to share her vision about me. She wants me to know that I will travel the world helping people. I want to ask follow-up questions, but we're called back downstairs, where the ceremony is resuming without us.

When we pass through the door to the downstairs hall, I am startled to see, arranged on a table near the main altar, the cut-up body of a dead cow, its tail, head, hindquarters, and organs all visible. The sight of the pig last time surprised me, but the sheer size of the cow's skinned body stops me in my tracks. A few men carry more slabs of meat on their backs from a refrigerator truck outside.

I later learn that animal sacrifices are intended to appease angry spirits. Pigs are commonly used, but Ms. Kim thought a cow was needed in this case, as proof of the client's earnestness and generosity, in order to ensure the rebuilding of the husband's business.

Ms. Kim's niece and successor, He Gyung Kim, a woman in her forties, is pacing the room frenetically. She wears a blue, red, and white *hanbok* and high hat. Her expression is intense and her brows are furrowed, as if she is worried or angry. Apparently in trance, she looks as if she may burst out crying or yelling. An assistant hands her a bowl of the cow's liver, which has been cut up. The niece grabs a handful of pieces and stuffs them in her mouth, swallowing some and spitting out others. She walks over to the table, thrusts her face into a huge slab of meat, and bites with the ferocity of a jackal, her face covered in blood. Assistants scurry around her like nurses in an emergency room, quick to wipe the blood from her face and the droplets from the floor. She grabs two of the cow's legs, ties them with a rope, hauls them across the floor, and shoves them into the arms of the client, who reluctantly receives them. The niece then snatches the legs back and drops them to the floor for the assistants to take away. Next, with help from others, she places the cow's head atop her own and dances around the room. After returning the head to the table, she bites the cow's testicles with a ferocity intended to intimidate evil spirits. Meanwhile, the client and Ms. Kim have been offered bowls of cut-up organs.

Another *mudang* pulls out a five-foot-high trident, which she stands on end, and all work together to place every part of the cow on the blades. A few times, the trident tilts to one side before a collection of hands pushes it upright. The head goes on last, its mouth stuffed with 10,000-*won* bills, a sign of the client's sincerity. Finally, the trident stands on its own briefly, as the music gets louder and louder. Then, slab by slab, the cow is placed back on the table, which sags from the weight of the meat. After large parts of it have been cut into manageable sizes for cooking, it is hauled away, some pieces carried to the kitchen and others saved for later use in the *kut*.

The *kut* continues, as two more *mudangs* dance solos. The first, a woman, brings out articles of child's clothing—silk pants and shirts—and piles them on the floor before the client. The *mudang* picks up one piece of clothing, hands it to the client, and then grabs it away from her. The *mudang* then repeats the move, the two of them both tugging at the cloth. She tells the client about a child who died and who wants comfort. Then the client places bills in the *mudang's* hand and hat. The next *mudang*, a man, demands that the client tuck money in his hat and in his belt. He dances in trance, yells to the musicians in what seems to be nonsensical Korean, and then spins and stomps his feet.

There's a short break before we're invited outside to watch the niece walk on the edges of knife blades. This ritual display of

He Gyung Kim slides a sharp blade across her tongue and then stands atop two blades, in displays of her strength and power.

the *mudang's* power is designed to impress not only the people present but the spirits whose assistance she solicits. Many Koreans believe that spirits can bring about bad luck, as well as good, and that these displays of the *mudang's* strength are needed to demonstrate that she will be unintimidated and tough enough to resist their blows.

As shaky as the sight of the slaughtered cow left me, it's harder for me to watch the *mudang* slide the edge of a sharp blade across her thigh and then down her tongue. Unharmed, she then uses a plastic chair to climb onto the cover of an aluminum drum, where she stands atop two twelve-by-four-inch blades, balancing by holding onto two bamboo poles with colorful flags tied to their ends, and calls out to mountain spirits. She finally steps down unhurt, to the relief of everyone. The musicians then close the ceremony with more music.

When we leave the center, the client offers to drive Yena and me back to Seoul. On the way, she describes her experiences of *kuts* as "cathartic." She explains that she requests a ceremony almost yearly, as part of her religion. She's been instructed by Ms. Kim not to say good-bye to us, because to do so could reverse the promise of good luck that came from the ceremony. When she drops us off at a gas station in the city, sure enough, she drives off without a word.

In the days since the second *kut*, I've reflected on what it takes to be a *mudang*. Most *mudangs* today have websites promoting their special skills and helping clients secure auspicious dates for their *kuts*, based on astrology. Some are able to earn sufficient money to live on, although their place in society is increasingly tenuous, as the younger generations distance themselves from the ancient traditions, in favor of modernity. North Korean *mudangs*, who come to the vocation through *sinbyong*, are expected to go into trance to contact spirits, and this allows them to alter their ceremonies accordingly. In contrast, their southern counterparts, chosen through lineage, place greater emphasis on sticking with given forms. Whether Korean shamanic traditions will survive during the coming century remains to be seen. Increasingly, younger people are turning their backs on the past and converting from Buddhism to Christianity. They tend to prefer electronic connections—those made via iPods, mobile phones, and the like—over spiritual connections. Such changes are often seen as a welcome embrace of modernity and westernization, necessary for competing in the world market.

My experiences in Korea have shown me that, by relying heavily on dance and music, *mudangs* are able to face darkness and mystery, and their skills and daring give hope to the discouraged. In trying to make sense of my own numinous experiences, I have come to realize that my craving for certainty forces a fixed frame around reality—which is, by nature, vast, boundless, and incomprehensible. The mystery of it all both enthralls and disquiets me. Through my involvement in dance and writing, both of which I often approach ritualistically, I am able to frequent liminal spaces—a participant in the everyday world, yet also an outsider, much like a *mudang*. I have learned that the dancing body is a powerful medium, as both a recipient and a conveyor of messages. Sometimes, during dance, the body reveals its secrets, and sometimes all it provides is shadows, but both of these contain the substance of who we are. As we change the pace and motion of the body moving through space, we can change awareness.

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