

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

BY LAUREL KENDALL

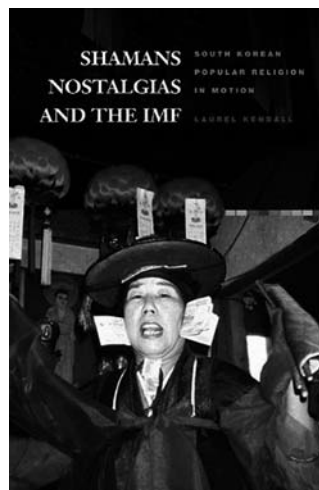
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Reviewed by Mary E. Connor

For thirty years, anthropologist Laurel Kendall has completed extensive fieldwork among Korean shamans. In *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF*, Kendall skillfully examines the role of shamanism in contemporary Korea's popular culture. Although many regard Shamanism as an anachronistic remnant of the past, the author explains how Korea's oldest religion has adapted itself to changing circumstances, why it is thriving in South Korea, and how it plays a significant role in alleviating anxiety in the modern world.

In the past, shamans were treated as outcasts, but Kendall describes how they are now treated with greater respect and even elevated as national icons. She details performances of the *kut*. The *kut* is a ceremony where shamans have traditionally performed rituals in rural communities for securing good luck, curing a physical or mental illness, or pacifying a deceased spirit. Now the *kut* has been recalibrated to acquire wealth, improve social status, and respond to the anxieties created by fluctuations in the market economy of a highly urbanized industrial society.



Kendall describes at some length the impact of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the resulting actions of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) that were seen as an act of national humiliation, and how this era impacted the world of the shaman. In describing the challenges of the shaman, she acknowledges that major economic and political events can be so all-encompassing as to render “the gods mute and impotent—at least for a time” and are beyond the shaman's powers (150). Korean shamans are typically reluctant to divine beyond the fortunes of their client's fami-

lies. However, she notes that the *kut*, offerings to the gods, and “exorcisms that expel ominous forces blunt the worst effects of a bad horoscope.”

Kendall should be commended for her extensive research, careful documentation, and clarity of writing. Her book is highly recommended for classes in Korean studies, comparative religion, and Asian studies. ■

MARY E. CONNOR taught United States History and Asian Studies for thirty-five years and now serves as President and Program Director of the Korea Academy for Educators, a non-profit organization that informs educators about Korean history and culture and the Korean-American experience. She is the author of *Asia in Focus: The Koreas* (ABC-CLIO, 2009) and the recipient of the Peace Corps Association's Global Educator Award and the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award.

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