

A R T S

C U L T U R E S

SHAMANISM & THE SACRED

ANCESTORS AND SPIRITS IN
THE TRADITION OF GABON

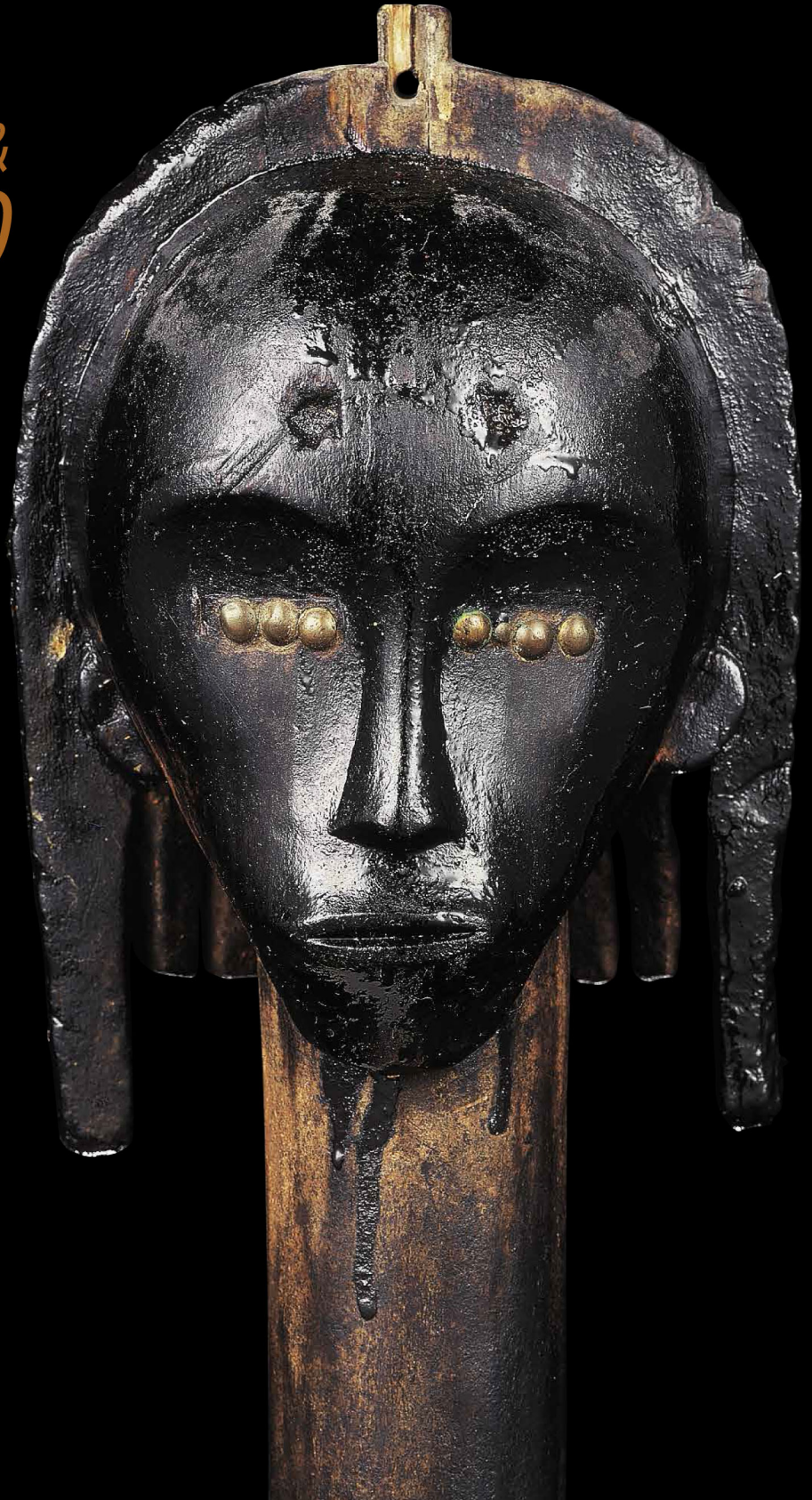
SHAMANISM
AND ROCK ART

THE SHAMAN WAS
A WOMAN

THE NEW SACRED SINCE
ANDRÉ BRETON AND
ÉDOUARD GLISSANT

AN ODE TO THE ANCESTORS
TWO CHU CULTURE ARTEFACTS

CORINE SOMBRUN
THE TRANCE AND SCIENCE





Evil spirits being exorcised during a shamanic ritual (*p'udashi*) at Hansuri, 2015. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.



> Shamans and Divers Turn
Despair Into Hope

> Ok-Kyung Pak

> Shamans and Divers Turn Despair Into Hope, and Distress Into Abundance on the Island of Jeju, Korea¹

Fig.1. Diver (*jamnyo*), 2016.
Photo Koh Sung-Mi.



The island of Jeju, located at the south-eastern tip of the Korean Peninsula (**maps**), is called the “home of 18,000 gods and goddesses”. It is known that Jeju pantheon is “goddess centred”, in the same way as Jeju society is “women-centred”. It is estimated that 80 per cent of the tutelary gods of the 350 shamanic shrines in Jeju villages are goddesses (Hyun 1986). According to Jeju mythology, goddesses participated in the creation of the world and the founding of villages and are influential in the separation or expansion of villages. Goddesses are in charge of childbirth, curing diseases, agriculture, wealth, longevity and happiness. They protect families, the village and their descendants, and women divers. Similar to Jeju women’s roles in village life, the goddesses’ roles in mythology are much more diverse than those of the gods and in a certain sense more important in the lives of village inhabitants. The roles of the gods in mythology usually relate to official institutions – maintenance of public order or physical power (Kim 1994, p. 214).

The fact of the high ratio of female deities and their important role should be linked to Jeju natural environment. Jeju is a volcanic island with plains, mountains and sea. This environment created a complex culture of agriculture, hunting and fishing. Jeju referred to as an "island of abundant women" does not refer to just the number of women, but to the central position of women. Attending to dry fields and diving deep into sea to collect sea products were the work of women (figs 1-2). Women's economic autonomy through active participation in the production process raised their social position and this is reflected in mythology.

Village shamanic shrines (Ponhyang-dang)

On Jeju there are 500 "shamanic myths".² It is believed that in 1965 there were 499 "natural villages" ("autonomous republics" as some residents say) or 200 villages for administrative purposes. "Natural villages" are closely linked to village shrines. The shrines established at the time of the founding of a village are located in its centre and the shrine god or goddess, believed to be an ancestor or ancestress

Fig. 2. Like farmers sowing before the harvest, the divers plant the seeds that will allow abalone and conch to grow in the ocean soil.
Photo Koh Sung-Mi.





Fig. 3. Sanctuary (hackberry bush from China) in Jeju, 2015. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.

of the inhabitants of the village, are said to dwell there. Shrines are mostly in open spaces and the god or goddess is represented by a tree (**fig. 3**) or a rock. Divers (**fig. 4**) and fishermen go to the village shrines near the sea to hold shamanic rituals (Jin 2005, p. 94). Jeju shamanism is closely related to the activities of survival and everyday life. Rather than the usual gods and goddesses descending from heaven, non-authoritarian, egalitarian gods and goddesses arriving from the sea or an imagined land are much more common on Jeju than on the mainland. Village shrine myths and the shamanic rituals (**fig. 5**) held in the shrines negate the authority of Neo-Confucian ideology and the patriarchal system that came from the mainland. They challenge the authority of the central government. Village shamanic rituals are expressions of historical consciousness and a way of narrating the history of the relationship between Jeju and the mainland (Kim 1999).

Although a shamanic myth is considered to be a simple story of the life of a god or goddess, the shaman's incantation (**fig. 6**) also has the function of dissolving the anger of that god or goddess, thus banishing an evil spirit and calming the people's bodies and souls. It is believed that the sacred words and actions of gods and goddesses are transmitted through shamanic myths. Therefore, these are a code of law the same as sacred books in other religions. Such myths are a source for the history of Jeju too, since they include historical events such as the peasant rebellions of the nineteenth century, the oppression by central government officials, and also details of the people's daily existence and village life (Jin 2005, pp. 58–59). Some scholars argue that shamanic myth is a metalanguage of Jeju culture (Yun 1996, p. 11), and Shamanic rituals represent Jeju people's views on the universe, supernatural entities, and human life and death.



Fig. 4. Majestic silhouette of a female diver walking like a general returning from the front. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.



Fig. 5. Female diver (*jamnyo*) burning a letter to a deity (*soji*) after the shamanic New Year's ritual, 2015. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.

Village shamanic rituals are led by a shaman, of either sex, and attended mainly by village women, who were mostly divers at the time of my fieldwork in 2016. These shamanic rituals are open to all the village inhabitants related by blood or territorial bonds. In Jeju a shaman is called a *shimbang*. *Shim* means “fixing down” or “holding on” and *bang* is a respectful form of address used when referring to a married woman. It is an ancient term used in matrilineal societies (Jin 2005, p. 75).

There are many different types of shamanic rituals (*gut*). The most representative *gut* nowadays are *gut* for divers, *Jamsoo-gut* (*gut* for divers), *Haeshin-gut* (*gut* for the sea goddess) and *Yeongdeng gut* (*gut* for the wind goddess), in addition to those for sending off the dead (figs 7-8), the ones for celebrating the completion of a new house, those for inaugurating a senior shaman, etc.



Fig. 6. Shaman Kang Bok-Nyo, 2016. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.



Fig. 7. Altar prepared for the shamanic ritual accompanying the departure of the deceased, 2015. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.

Fig. 8. Shamanic ritual for sending the soul of the deceased to the other world, Udo, 2015. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.



Different shamanic rituals have a common structure with seven steps (Hyun 2002).

Deep sea divers' dependence on shamanic rituals

The shamanic world is a world of women. An important part of shamanism in Jeju is due to the close relationship between deep-sea divers and their beliefs and rituals. As the divers say, the act of diving is "travelling between this life and that life", risking their lives every time they enter the sea. Their fear is so great that they cannot enter sea without calling on their ancestress to protect them. One diver said: "I am not scared to enter the sea after the ritual. Strangely the sea was clear until the



Fig. 9. The names of the divers, written on the paper in front of the altar, 2015. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.

7th [of March in lunar calendar], but when we entered the sea on the 9th after the ritual on the 8th, the tide underwater was strong. It must be the season when the tide changes. The day after *jamsoo-gut*, we usually have to go down deeper to see anything because of the strong current. Usually we would be scared, but we are able to get seafood after the ritual. Our heart is calm when we have performed the ritual. With the ritual, we have the protection of the ancestress of the village shrine and the sea-dragon goddess” (Kang 2005, p. 54). They are therefore in constant need of the shrines and the gods and goddesses served by shamans. The bond between them is strong: the divers trust in the shamans and the shamans count on the divers. They are together at shared ritual events where the shamans are the priests, but shamans also recite mythological oral literature and invent chants. Thus, shamans and divers collaborate in the creation of a metaphysical model, where again the divers have recourse, in both an individualized and a collective manner, to a kind of spiritual support to cope with the dangers they face at work.

The most important point of the ritual is the “prayer” that there be no accidents at sea, repeated throughout different steps of the ritual such as putting divers’ names in writing on the altar offered to a deity (**fig. 9**); “blocking bad fortune” (*saederim*) through a purification act (called *p’udashi*); asking the dragon goddess not to force the divers to take the path to the gate of her kingdom (death); throwing food wrapped in paper (**fig. 10**) for the goddess into the sea to show their sincerity; singing a shamanic song to ask the dragon goddess to let them live or be guided to a good place in the world of the dead if death cannot be avoided (Kang 2005, pp. 49–52). Most of the deities that women divers pray to are goddesses whom they claim as their ancestors. Divers, thus, have a legitimate right to dive in the sea, the territory of their

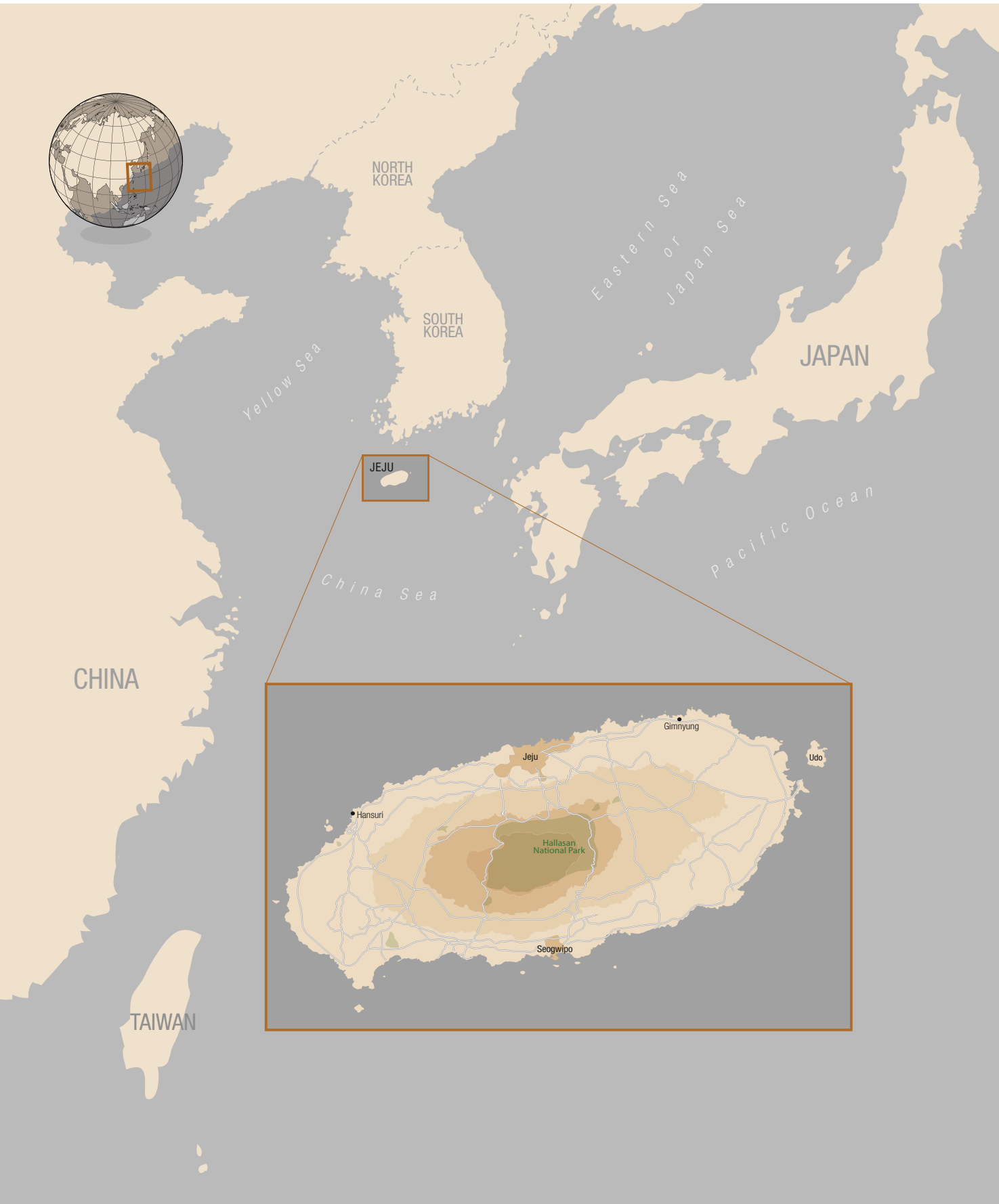


Fig. 10. Food thrown into the sea in a gesture to feed the dragon goddess, 2015. Photo Koh Sung-Mi.

ancestress, and to be protected there. An intricate relationship exists between the three components of the divers’ *Haeshin-gut*: client (divers), shaman, shamanic ritual. If divers disappear, there will be no divers’ ritual. If the divers’ catch decreases, because of their ageing and no younger women take over because of environmental pollution, there will be no ritual and the village will lose an important collective ceremony supporting village unity. Then shamans will not be able to perform *gut* for the village and shamanic tales will gradually disappear. A shaman will no longer be needed.

Haeshin-gut: divers’ life insurance

The total budget of a big divers’ ritual I attended in April 2016 (in the village of Gimnyung) was 10,000,000 won (approximately 6,700 euros). A quarter of this was the shaman’s fee. All of this came from divers’ own earnings and work. If it came from the village’s collective fund, the divers would not have the same respect in the village. Gimnyung divers pay their own life insurance and maintain their central position as descendants of the dragon goddess, and manage the collective ritual for the matron of the village.



NOTES

1. This article is based on chapter 4 of my book published by the Fondation Culturelle Barbier-Mueller in 2018: *The Jamnyo of Jeju, the Women Divers of Korea, Neo-Confucianism and a Dual Mythology*, based on my fieldwork conducted in 2016.

2. Since the 1960s the study of shamanism has been active on Jeju. The texts used for these studies are Jeju's shamanic mythology : *ponpuri* (stories of the origins of tutelary gods and goddesses of village shrines). There are three types of *ponpuri*: (1) general *ponpuri* about twelve gods governing natural phenomena, human conditions, human life and death; (2) village shrine *ponpuri* relating the history of tutelary god of the village; (3) ancestor *ponpuri* relating to the patron god of a family or a clan.

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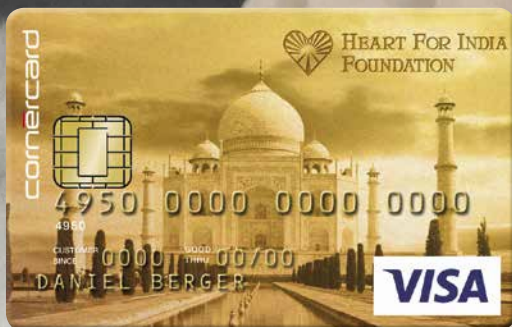


BIOGRAPHY

Ok-Kyung Pak was born in Korea. She holds a PhD in social anthropology. She has conducted two periods of fieldwork among the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, Indonesia: the first in 1980–1981 and the second in 1986. She has published several books on kinship, inequality, gender relations and the title system in West Sumatra. In 2016 she carried out a study of the *jamnyo* women divers of Jeju island.

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