tales like “Snow White,” her introduction and her headnotes fail to construct a persuasive and insightful argument regarding the meaning and raison d’être for the related narrative versions of “Snow White” that she has assembled. She offers instead a pastiche of topical assertions and loosely connected observations about the tale’s ability to utilize “a mythic energy” (p. 2) to provide “ancestral wisdom” for listeners that bears “on their own life experiences” (p. 4). Tatar’s attempt to specify what this ancestral wisdom includes and how it connects to audiences’ own life experiences ranges widely, including the theories of Sergei Eisenstein, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Joseph Campbell, Max Lüthi, Bruno Bettelheim, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. However, the ideas of these disparate theorists are not coherently fashioned into a sound interpretation of the fairy tale at hand that is cogently linked to the narrative details. Rather, they are hung on the story as decorations adorning the artistic artifact. They are intriguing, and at times illuminating, but ultimately, they are not used to construct a convincing and comprehensive explanation for the continued existence of the story of “Snow White.”


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There has long been an elephant in the room when it comes to Korean shamanism, and that is the economic aspects of shamanic rituals. If the elephant is noticed at all, it is—and has been for centuries—used to demonstrate the moral deficiency of shamanism and its practitioners. Those who argue in favor of shamanism and seek to illustrate its value, on the other hand, very often simply ignore the elephant or attempt to explain it away as an unfortunate and embarrassing aberration.

Finding herself face-to-face with this elephant early in her fieldwork on Cheju Island (the southernmost province of the Republic of Korea and often considered an exotic other in relation to the mainland), Kyoim Yun took neither of these paths, instead choosing to tackle the animal head-on. Unlike detractors and defenders of shamanism, she notes, the actual practitioners and patrons “see ritual as a fundamentally economic activity in itself, one based on exchange and relationship management” (p. 13). The Shaman’s Wages starts with this premise, rooted in the lived reality of shamans and their clients, and seeks to answer, rather than ignore, the uncomfortable questions that follow from it.

The first two chapters provide some historical background to attitudes toward shamanism on Cheju. Yun first deals with a well-known incident from the Chosŏn period (1392–1897), a 1702 purge initiated by the island’s Neo-Confucian governor. This purge, during which the governor had 129 shamanic shrines put to the torch, is often depicted by scholars as being a clash between a government minister from the mainland and the local subaltern population. Yun’s treatment of this historical incident is more nuanced than most, though. She points out that the government minister did appear to be genuinely concerned for his subjects and adopted a pragmatic approach to preventing what he saw as the wastefulness of shamanic rituals. He even criticized, albeit indirectly, the hypocrisy of a government that made shamanic rituals illegal and yet still sought to profit from them through a shamanic tax. The governor also failed to see the symbolic meaning of the ritual offerings; however good his intentions may have been, he did not consider the matter from the local population’s point of view.

The second chapter turns the clock forward to the twentieth century, a tumultuous time in Korean history that began with colonial rule under Japan, from 1910 to 1945. During this period, shamanism continued to be subjected to criticism and misinterpretation. As various parties vied for political, social, and cultural influence, they all sought to use shamanism to further their own ends. Korean Catholics were fervent in their persecution of the religion, which they saw as a native superstition.
that led people astray. The Japanese colonial government had a more complex—even contradictory—attitude. On the one hand, shamanism was a useful foil to illustrate how much more advanced the Japanese Empire was. On the other hand, it was a window into an idealized past that showed what Japan had lost; the unsavory economic aspects were passed off as modern contamination. Interestingly, nationalist scholars who sought to combat Japanese influence and uncover an autonomous Korean tradition also idealized shamanism and ignored the ritual economy. This attitude continued into postcolonial South Korea when government initiatives painted shamanism as an impediment to modernization, and political activists drew on shamanic rituals to further their agendas. As usual, there was no concern for the reality of shamanism on the ground as its practitioners and patrons understood it.

Building on this historical background, Yun dives into shamanism as it is practiced on Cheju today, drawing on ethnographic research that presents a fuller picture of Cheju shamanism than might be gleaned from recorded myths. In chapter 3, dealing with the “art of ritual exchange,” Yun presents an account of a ritual performed by a shaman for no client but herself—that is, to thank the gods for the power they had given her—and for which she had spent a significant amount of money. Surely if shamans were mere swindlers, they would not be so extravagant with their own resources. This ritual also demonstrates the reciprocal nature of the relationship between humans and gods—the gods need the shamans just as much as the shamans need the gods. Yun then examines the offerings themselves, common goods like food, clothing, and money that the gods are thought to need just as humans do. These offerings are imbued with symbolic meaning and ritual efficacy by the shamans, who present them to the gods with the proper words. Also important in this chapter is an analysis of a well-known shamanic myth, not simply as a literary or religious text, but within the context of the ritual economy, showing how material offerings and the reciprocal relationship between gods and humans directly relate to the lives and experiences of the clients for whom the ritual is performed.

Next, Yun examines in greater detail the labor performed by the shaman in providing a service for clients. As mentioned above, both practitioners and patrons understand shamanic rituals as economic activities, but each comes to the table with different demands and ideas about the value of the services being offered and purchased. As Yun shows through accounts of pre-ritual negotiations over fees—an activity that is almost universally ignored in ethnographic studies of shamanism in Korea—arrangements are made verbally and often with no agreed-upon definitive fee. This answers the question of why shamans insist on monetary offerings (which are kept by the shaman after the ritual) in addition to the fees they receive for their services: if they fail to secure what they believe is a fair price from the clients, they need to make up the balance somehow. The difference in what a practitioner and patron perceive as a fair price comes down to differences in opinion on the value of the shaman’s labor. Yun quotes one local who says that shamans earn money while sitting on a mat, implying that they do not have to work hard. But an account of a ritual known as yŏnggae ullim, or the weeping of souls, shows just how skillful the shaman must be, and how much mental, emotional, and physical labor is required. The catch, of course, is that the shaman cannot appear to be working too hard, lest the ritual seem inauthentic. Ironically, the easier the shaman makes her work appear, the more authoritative the ritual.

Yun wraps up her examination of Cheju shamanism with another uncomfortable reality: shamanic rituals as heritage goods—that is, cultural performances that have been validated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designation of intangible cultural heritage. Cultural performances of shamanic rituals are a double-edged sword, as they are easily accessible yet at the same time removed from the communities that gave them meaning in the first place. Yet such rituals fit in nicely—if ironically—with Yun’s overall argument, as the same profit motive for which shamanism has been criticized for centuries was one of the primary driving forces behind efforts to gain the UNESCO designation. In the era of soft power, shamanic rituals have been seen as
another arrow in the quiver of Korean culture ready for globalization. In the process of seeking the designation, though, the nomination materials reinforced the notion of Cheju as a provincial backwater and shamanism as an idealized and pre-modern tradition. As so many have done before them, the parties involved created their own image of shamanism divorced from the reality on the ground. In that sense, little has changed in the attitude toward shamanism.

The economic aspects of Korean shamanism have long been considered an inconvenient truth by scholars, often ignored or explained away as not representing its true nature. Indeed, when faced with uncomfortable questions from inquisitive exchange students, I confess that I have attempted to explain away this aspect of shamanism as an unfortunate but unavoidable side effect rather than as a fundamental feature of the religion. Yun shows, however, through a skillful blend of historical and ethnographic research, that the ritual economy is not something to be swept under the rug; instead, it lies at the heart of shamanism as a living practice on Cheju Island, and has done so for centuries. *The Shaman's Wages* will appeal especially to readers familiar with the Korean religious landscape, but it is accessible to anyone with an interest in the subject and is indeed a pleasure to read. An insightful and valuable contribution to the study of Korean shamanism, it should find a place on the shelf of anyone who wants to have a better and more complete understanding of this living tradition. It will certainly be at the top of my recommended reading list for inquisitive and interested students.

Didier Boremanse has done extensive work with the Lacandon since the early 1970s, and in this volume he has put together a large collection of Lacandon myths and prayers collected over the last 5 decades. This in itself is an impressive feat. As anyone who has done similar work knows, recording such stories, translating them, checking translations with local collaborators, and then exploring the symbolism in the wording requires tremendous perseverance and a level of endurance that I could rarely muster in my own 4 decades of work in the same communities. So I want to start this review by acknowledging the effort required to collect and present this material. Boremanse has compiled a useful collection of texts for scholars interested in Mayan folklore. He provides the Mayan transcriptions of the stories and describes in detail the ritual settings in which he heard them.

On the other hand, this is a very old-fashioned piece of work. In particular, it reminds me of work by Paul Radin, in which Radin presented extensive ethnographic information but only for the purpose of reporting it. While Boremanse invokes Clifford Geertz’ notion of thick description in chapter 4 (p. 103), and in chapter 9 provides a structural analysis of a folktale in the style of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the majority of Boremanse’s work is actually most similar to Victor Turner’s work with Ndembu ritual symbolism (without Turner’s exploration of the properties of symbols). Consequently, the absence of a coherent theoretical framework results in a work that lacks continuity from one chapter to the next. Further, there is little information here that is not already covered by other authors.

Like most ethnographers in the last hundred years, Boremanse focuses exclusively on Lacandon non-Christian religion. Because those religious practices were exclusively the activity of male heads of households, the book isn’t really about Lacandon myths and rituals. It is about the stories told by a few elderly ritual leaders. While this is not bad, Boremanse’s material may be of limited use in folklore studies because he makes no attempt to describe the performative aspects of many of these tales, such as their recitation in couplets or the audience’s participation. Further, while Boremanse acknowledges the variation in one individual’s performance of prayers, he does not account for the variation in these stories over time. Many elements of these tales have changed since the...