

## Goddesses, Shamans, and Diving Grannies

by Anne Hilty, PhD  
eastwest.psyche@gmail.com

"The ceremony begins tomorrow. Would you like to attend?"

It's not every day that one gets invited by a female shaman to join a funereal ritual being held for a drowned free-diving woman, to ensure the safe passage of her spirit to the Otherworld. Naturally, I say yes.

At dawn the following day, I arise and begin my preparations. Meditation, to clear the mind and open the heart. Bathing, to cleanse the body. No perfume, no accessories; new, brightly-coloured clothing, comfortable but respectful, not too revealing. Offerings of fruit, cooked rice, fish and eggs, and money in an envelope, to be presented to the gods at the shrine's altar. I am joined by my companion Sunyoung, a local woman serving as my interpreter, and off we go.

I'd been living on Jeju Island for several years, exploring it extensively -- the central volcano and its "oreum" or secondary cones, cliffs, caves, waterfalls, outlying islands, beaches from crystal-white to coral-pink to volcanic-black. Solitary, I'd walked the 422-kilometre trail system, learning the island's history and writing about its traditions and customs. I'd attended quite a few shamanic rituals, too, both here and around the world, a 30-year passion. But this -- this was something else.

I find myself thinking about these divers as we drive along. Women of Jeju have been free-diving for over two millennia, to feed and support their families; these "hae-nyeo" or "sea women" begin diving in childhood and continue into their elder years. Diving up to twenty metres on breathhold of up to two minutes, they are remarkable; every dive, however, brings danger, of not returning from this watery Underworld.

We reach the ritual site and, removing our shoes, quietly enter. The ritual is held near the community's diving grounds, in a coastal shrine to the dragon god and goddess of the sea. Many shrines are natural, seated in rock formations or beneath a central tree; this one is human-made, a small, one-room building with a wide entry. Directly opposite, the altar runs the entire length, with candles and burning incense; pyramids of apples, oranges and pears; sticky ricecakes, bowls of rice grains, local alcohol, and the many food offerings of the devotees. Adorning the rear wall are colourful images representing local deities, white paper art created by shamans, photo of the deceased woman, and white paper ribbons on which memorial messages are written.

The women divers have often come here to worship their gods -- many of them, fierce goddesses. In addition to Yowang the Dragon King and his wife, Yowang Halmang the Dragon Queen, there's Yeongdeung Halmang, goddess of sea and wind; Jacheongbi, goddess of earth -- and, love; Gamunjang-agi, goddess of fortune; Baekjo Halmang, mother of 70 shamanist deities; Samseung Halmang, goddess of fertility and childbirth; Jowang Halmang, hearth goddess; and many more. Jeju's creation myth centres on a giant goddess, Seolmundae Halmang, embodied by the central volcano and watching over all.

"Wherever you are," the locals say, "you can see Mother Seolmundae."

As we enter, the women already inside -- a blend of Korean, Mongolian, Japanese and "Polynesian" heritage with athletic physiques that belie their age -- grow quiet at the sight of me, a "westerner." When Suh Sun Sil, Grand Shaman as her mother before her, greets me warmly, the others visibly relax, though with great curiosity. Sunyoung and I contribute our food and monetary offerings; kneeling, we bow deeply three times, after which we write messages of condolence and are seated on the floor near the back. Soon, the ritual begins.

"Shamanism is a messy thing," a local scholar friend once said, and indeed, rituals are a riotous assault on the senses. Bright colours dominate, from the many costumes of the shamans to the altar with its fluttering paper ribbons, bright candles, and pyramids of fruit -- and, the bright clothing of the devotees. Sounds fill the air: beating of drums, clanging of cymbals and ringing of bells, interspersed with the shamans' powerful recitation of oral history, ritual purpose, and specific rites, punctuated by the crash of waves and cries of seabirds, accompanied by wails of sorrow. Scents of incense and food offerings mingle in the air, the sea breezes as a backdrop -- and constant reminder.

Devotees themselves are far from silent, with emotional release, murmurings of agreement with the shaman, comments to their neighbours. Food is frequently shared, from ricecakes and slices of fruit to full meals of raw fish, shellfish, and sea vegetation harvested and prepared by these diving women. There is a great deal of what the locals call "skinship" -- bonding based on close physical contact -- in the crowded room. Permeating all is the sense of spirit, meaning, and community, a palpable sensation.

Shaman Suh, dressed in red floor-length robes and headdress, begins by calling to the spirit world, identifying those present and the ritual's purpose, invoking the gods. Eventually, she announces that the gods have arrived, enticed by the bright colours, musical sounds, incense and candles toward this end, and drawn to the need of the devotees. The true work now begins; this ritual will extend over two days of twelve to fourteen hours each.

Since I'm not taking photos or notes, nor receiving interpretation except during breaks, am quietly observant and visibly moved, was welcomed by the shaman and know how to participate, the women divers have accepted my presence. As we share a meal, these grandmothers feed me -- sea urchin, abalone, turban shell -- as if I'm a child, and I am delighted. We raise our cups of the local "makgeolli" rice wine to the memory of their drowned sister, and they slap me on the back heartily.

When Shaman Suh and I had discussed this ritual the day before, she'd identified two goals: transition of the dead woman's spirit; and, "healing the minds" of this diving sisterhood. I'm a psychologist, and many times we've spoken of her spiritual tradition as a type of "indigenous psychology," a concept she fully supports.

In one rite today, another female shaman, costumed in green, asks several people to come forward and kneel before the altar: the diver who first noticed her diving sister's drifting body and tried, unsuccessfully, to retrieve her; the man who discovered the deceased woman's body on the shore and called for help; the three rescue workers, two men and a woman, who retrieved the body; the female chief of this diving consortium, responsible for the safety of all her members. The shaman explains that each of these people has suffered a shock or what she terms "soul loss," a common feature of shamanist belief.

As they kneel before the altar, the shaman dances around them, fanning the air with the white ribbons attached to her ritual knives, to remove negativity; she places her hands first on the crown of each

person's head, then on the upper back and chest to cradle the heart, then back to the crown, all the while chanting, the air filled with the sounds of drums, cymbals, bells -- and weeping.

As the sun dips low in the western sky, Shaman Suh, now blue-robed and accompanied by two helper shamans -- and I, accompanied by my interpreter -- walk swiftly along the shore from the shrine to the location where the dead woman's body had been retrieved. The shaman places one end of a long white cloth rope into the water; while holding the other end four metres away, she gives offerings to the sea gods and entreats them to release the woman's spirit. The rope a conduit, the shaman herself the container -- and in this way, she "carries" the dead woman's spirit back to the altar.

"Now, we are ready for the second day," she announces to all, and the first day of ritual is brought to a gentle and satisfying close. Indeed, we have all become "containers" of the passing woman's spirit, as we silently file out of the shrine, carrying her and the day's events in our hearts and minds until we gather again in the morning.

On the twenty-minute drive home, neither Sunyoung nor I say a word. The extraordinary events of the day have compelled us to reverence.

At dawn of the new day, I prepare myself once more to meet the gods, to sit with these women in universal sisterhood and humanity as we grieve together and release the spirit of the deceased. I cannot help but be struck by the positive psychological impact -- on an individual, a family, a community -- that such a ritual brings.

As Sunyoung and I arrive once more at the shrine, some of the women are standing outside, chatting and laughing; life goes on, after all. Soon, however, a stillness descends and we begin entering the shrine in small clusters. Yesterday's work was a clearing, a preparation; today, a transition, release, healing.

Shaman Suh begins anew. She greets the gods and, just as she recited the history of the village and ritual participants on the previous day, begins chanting the life story of the woman now deceased.

Ko, that was her family name, one of the three ancient lines of the island's people. And unlike many divers -- most in their 70s and 80s, as the young no longer enter this profession -- she was only 52 years old. Like me, I think to myself, a bit startled. No one knows why she died; losing consciousness underwater, which can occur for various reasons, is the most likely cause. The shaman continues to tell the woman's story, and once again out of respect I forego all interpretation for a later summary.

Meantime: I experience. Deeply. Not understanding the words being said, I am lulled by the cadence of the recitation, and in a light trance state, I let the whole of the experience wash over me as I commune with the spirit of the dead woman and with her community surrounding me. I become a mixture of grief and loss, fear and exhilaration, awe of mystery, respect, connectedness, love. Ultimately, it is this: a pure, humanistic love for all the complexities of the grand human experience.

I float, drift, in this matrix, as if under a spell, as if under the sea, as if out of body -- as if, out of life. With my drowned sister, for a time I flow.

Shaman Suh is a master at her craft. She too is my age, and a practising shaman since she was seventeen. Like the psychologist, she recognises the sensitivity of this moment, and indeed, of every transition in this lengthy ritual. She skillfully brings her recitation to a close and, pausing in silence,

gently invites all of us to stay with this moment -- to mourn our sister before we prepare to send her on her way. Transition complete, the musician shamans begin; healing rites are conducted, fortune-telling proffered -- and then we, and the spirits, share another sumptuous repast.

In the afternoon, a comedic skit ensues, meant to entertain the gods -- and ease the hearts of the mourners. When Shaman Suh gauges a lightening of mood, she begins the final rite. Reminding the gods of the woman's good life and our devotion and offerings, she entreats them to take the deceased woman's spirit with them as they depart. Though this brings fresh tears to all, we are now sufficiently prepared to let her go.

Sensing this shift, Shaman Suh announces that the gods have now gone, taking the divers' sister with them to the Otherworld. And, as the musicians -- themselves skilled shamans -- begin playing once more, this time with great vigour, all are invited to stand, raise their arms in the air, and dance together ... in celebration of life.

And so, to dive another day.