Urban Development and Vernacular Religious Landscapes in Seoul

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In July 2014 I meet an Israeli government official working in Seoul who was surprised to learn that my research focuses on possessed Korean shamans (*manshin*) and that large numbers of such spiritual practitioners exist in the city. The next day he invited me to his office for a longer talk about my impressions of Seoul. He introduced his office staff, women in their 20s or 30s, Koreans who are well versed in English. 'They do not think that there are many shamans in Seoul,' he exclaims. I understood that I was in for a kind of test. My story must have seemed too far-fetched to be real. We started chatting in English, and the staff members politely enquire how I learned Korean and why I study shamanism. Have I really met a shaman in Seoul? I answered that I know quite a few practitioners of that vernacular religion and asked if they had met any. They giggled in embarrassment, and then the official urged us: 'Do it in Korean.' When we switched to the language that he could not understand, the talk became less formal. I told the secretaries how much I enjoy shamanic rituals, artefacts and music, and slowly their own stories began to emerge. Of course they all knew that there are *manshin* in Seoul. One had her fortune told as a teenager, and another had her marriage date decided after a *manshin* consulted with spirits of natural elements. I asked if they watched the popular television series *The Lotus Flower Fairy* (2004–5, director Yi Chinyŏng), which dramatizes the story of a young *manshin* over 174 episodes. We began discussing plot details and agreed that it was a fascinating story. Even the staff members who had never met a *manshin* in real life knew that they are mostly women, and how they practise supernatural mediation, possession trance and divination. Seoulites spend much time watching media products and their knowledge and attitudes are based, at least to some extent, on such mediated representations of the world. The official inter-

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vened in our conversation and asked me: 'So, do they or don't they know shamans?' Reluctant to reveal what was said in the shelter of a language foreign to him, I suggested: 'Why don't we meet some together?'

The next Friday, we embarked on an unofficial tour of Seoul's northern side. We visited the Shamanism Museum, established in 2013 by my dissertation fieldwork adviser, Prof. Yang Chongsŭng (Jongsung). To our delight, we met there the famous Manshin Kim Namsun, who came especially to join us. Manshin Kim had been participating in my research for the past ten years and was curious to meet a high-ranking foreign official. The visitors hear explanations about the various artefacts and are invited to bow and make a wish in front of a reconstructed altar on display. Later, I saw that Prof. Yang had uploaded a photograph of our visit to the museum's blog. I suggested that we continue to a rental shrine complex located on the hill above the museum. I was not sure if a shamanic ritual (*kut*) would be held there then but we would meet some interesting people, and see altars and sacred trees. While approaching the shrine we heard the loud drumming of a *kut*. We got lucky. The next hour was spent with the official and his wife standing, eyes wide open, while two rituals were being held simultaneously in adjacent shrine rooms. In one, an old *manshin* was commemorating a deceased person, holding his framed photograph and later inviting his soul to descend into her body for his family to consult and appease. In the other room, a younger practitioner was chanting in front of a young couple who could not have children. She took a live chicken and rubbed it on the barren man's face. Then she lit a piece of cloth and the flames were tossed around. The chicken was flung wildly above the couple's head to exorcize the spirits that were believed to be afflicting them. The Israeli official and his wife were convinced. There is a lively shamanic scene in Seoul. At the rental shrine, just behind a fancy residential area and a prestigious university, this was just another ordinary day.

In this chapter I maintain that the diverse and extensive presence of vernacular religion in Seoul makes even controversial practices, such as spirit mediumship, an inseparable part of the experience provided by the city. Persecution by the government in the 1970s and continuous disapproval by the literati elites have not liquidated various forms of divination and possession practices. Moreover, with the help of new-media promotion the practitioners have gained legitimized places to perform rituals and tell their myths and supernatural revelations. Contrary to the assumption of the Israeli official (before he met several *manshin*), most Seoulites are well aware of the existence of such perceived-ancient religious traits. Traditional belief systems and practices are well established in this megametropolis side by side with its elaborate futuristic architecture and technologically dense lifestyle. I have explored this religious urban landscape using participant observation and in-depth discussions and interviews since 2005.

In the early days of anthropological research in urban spaces, much of the scholarly debate was about whether cities should be explored using the same methodologies as in rural communities, and more broadly if cities are proper

sites for anthropological investigation (Prato and Pardo, 2013). These questions are answered positively through the insights and understanding that I and other anthropologists working there have gained from our close encounters with Koreans in Seoul (see e.g. Abelmann 2003 and Nelson 2000). This relatively new city was resurrected from the ashes of the Korean War in 1953 to become the centre of most of South Korean lifestyle, cultural developments and trend creation. As Prato and Pardo (2013) point out, it would be unnecessary and misleading to define clearly where the city begins and ends, as was attempted by leading scholars in the 1970s. The metropolis is ever expanding through a sophisticated creation of roads and subway lines, as well as networks of symbolic practices and activities related to consumerism and perceived global trends. In the rural areas, the inhabitants use service towns where the same chain cafe's, clothing stores and banks prevail as in the city. Similarly, dwellers in Seoul can shop in rural-style markets and little stores that are still widely spread across the city. While more than half of the population in Korea live and work in and around Seoul, regional family backgrounds are still dominant in identity formation. Seoul is often called a 'global city', but this term has come to be problematized to include also the uniqueness of each such place (Prato and Pardo 2013, 97). Therefore ethnography in this city does not produce an image of a sheer international highly technologized living space. It also shows strong local ideologies, practices and traditions. In order to produce insights from close encounters with *manshin* and other Seoul dwellers, my research became a 'multi-sited ethnography that at once offers an in-depth understanding of how people relate to the wider system beyond their neighbourhood and workplace and links nicely the analysis of micro-processes to the complexity of macro-level influences' (Prato and Pardo 2013, 96–7).

Cities are portrayed in public discourse and the media as sites of sophistication and technological progress, while city dwellers are seen as more intellectually gifted, creative, business oriented and globally informed than rural people (Florida 2002). Seoul, the largest South Korean metropolis, is perceived worldwide as the birthplace of Samsung and other technological innovations that challenge Western economic supremacy. However, as shown here, the city also offers extensive landscapes of aggregated traditional symbolism. Seoul's unique 'personality' is characterized simultaneously by innovation-inspired structures and lifestyles and various tokens of Korea's vernacular religions. Following the analysis of Steve Pile (2005), who looks for the slippery notion of cities' individuality, I explore the uniqueness of religious behaviours and material representation of cultural ideas in this urban cluster.

The religious landscape of Seoul is characterized by thousands of Christian churches, Buddhist temples, shamanic shrines and diviners' offices, all in a poetic relation with the local grounds. The interactions between structures and the people who use them or view them construct meanings and forms. Landscapes 'come into being only at the moment of their apprehension by an external observer, and thus have a complex poetics and politics' (Cosgrove 2006, 50). Churches were built in the early twentieth century close to

landmarks such as the King's Palace and the City Hall to maintain visibility around power centres. Churches amid neighbourhoods characterized by many *manshin*'s homes and shrines intend to proselytize the superstitious residents. In the early twentieth century, Kuksadang, the most famous shamanic shrine in Seoul, was moved from its original location on Nam mountain (*namsan*) to a less auspicious place as a demonstration of power by the occupying Japanese authorities. Considering the semiotics and aesthetics of spaces, that city dwellers move through is crucial in order to understand the emotional impact of materiality on urban life. My observations in Seoul yielded a theoretical understanding that articulates and adds to Aitken's conclusion: 'Spaces are active and powerful parts in the ways we as individuals, and we, as parts of families, communities, societies, cultures, and politics, apprehend and change the world' (Aitken 2014, 7–8). These activities, in turn, are closely related to historic events, political engagement, technological developments and dynamic cultural trends.

I specifically explore the relationships between the religious beliefs of people living in Seoul and spatial considerations that span well beyond the intention of these individuals. Both the religious and the practical considerations of geographical allotment of land are embedded in the vernacular cultural constructions and have been evolving and practised in uniquely Korean manners for hundreds of years. In the nineteenth century, *manshin* were banned by law from entering the city. Therefore, areas right next to the old wall's gates have become the hub of many divination offices. The relationships between humans and supernatural beings are experienced as a daily reality by many of Seoul's dwellers. Some who have made this belief system the centre of their lifestyle and livelihood serve as advisers to others, who use this practice at random. Everyone acknowledges the tradition of fortune telling as a Korean cultural trait.

Similar definitions of spiritual mediators abound in other cities too. Pardo describes how in Naples, in a Christian context, individuals who are 'regarded as having special personal qualities and access to special resources among the living and the dead … respond to unorthodox requirements of the relationship between actors' outcome oriented action, the moral demands of their identity and social norms' (1996, 104). I find this rendering of mediating between the living and the dead especially appealing in the Korean case because a negative stigma applied to fortune tellers and *manshin* as gain-seeking exploiters still abounds in the local discourse and in some media depictions. However, in all my encounters with *manshin* I have not met one who neglected her professional and personal morality or who treated with disrespect what she believed was the supernatural cosmos around her. In the Confucian world order, women who perform dances in public are seen as immoral and rude. Yet, from the Buddhist perspective, the function of these rituals in pacifying the dead and helping suffering clients who need spiritual consultation is perceived by the *manshin* and many others as a moral action of grace. This multilayered structure of morality has been at play in the designation of places for vernacular

religious activity. Even when Confucian-oriented rulers tried to marginalize these cultural trends, *manshin* and other fortune tellers managed to maintain their trade. They managed to do so even when they had to move outside the city walls. As in Naples, spiritual practitioners are considered marginal in society and raise suspicion because they gain monetary benefits by prophesizing. At the same time, in Seoul they take a leading and visible role in many locales that are described below. In contemporary Seoul, fortune tellers enjoy more freedom in erecting their consultation facilities, especially around the New Year. Fischer has discussed *adaptive agency* as the capacity to change the options available and to actualize these as viable choices using the help of others (Fischer 2008). In a similar process, personal levels of activity by fortune tellers in Seoul are supported by cooperation with clients, co-practitioners and city officials.

Within Korea's religions, shamanism, divination and ancestor rites are categorized as indigenous vernacular trends; they are initiated by individuals and repeated regularly by other individuals with similar intentions and structures to form a norm (Howard, 2006). Indeed, as Primiano (1995) argues, vernacular practices are based on individual interpretations of events and traditions, a feature that allows the adaptation of ancient belief systems to the fast pace of contemporary South Korea's urbanity.

Spatial patterns have changed in Seoul as a result of fast urbanization, increases in land prices and traditional neighbourhoods and professional zoning. The resulting composition is at the same time ordered and chaotic. Some streets are straight and lined with high-rise glass-covered office buildings, while just behind them winding steep alleys remind one of the old-time rural geographical layout. In this process, some aspects of Korea's divination and shamanism have become more homogenized and supervised, such as the government-supported shamanic rituals that serve as national emblems of Korea's unique indigenous cultures (Sarfati 2014). Still, within the city most practitioners enjoy the freedom of unsupervised self-promotion and ritual production that are less common in the more institutionalized Buddhism and Christianity. This urban phenomenon reflects and constitutes intricate relationships between micro- and macroprocesses. The individual need to consult diviners and perform exorcisms is enabled and accentuated by the city's acceptance of signposted divination huts and shrines. As suggested by Pardo's research in Naples (1996, 11), material and non-material aspects in people's life interact continuously, resulting in unique worldviews and actions. Typical production of meaning through interaction with spaces of vernacular religious activity is endemic to Seoul; at the same time, it is but another case of urban lifestyle, similar in parts to the situation in other 'global cities'.

The effect of vernacular religion on the urban landscape of Seoul will be examined below through three cases of interaction between urban dwellers and practices of vernacular religion. The first case is many divination tents in central downtown spots. The second is shamanic shrines in hills and mountains around Seoul that become a debated ground when the city extends and encapsulates

their sites. The third case is the representation of vernacular religion in the Korean media. An ethnographic enquiry into cultural trends in Seoul cannot ignore mass-communication platforms. As an anthropologist working in such an urban setting, I feel that in order to understand better the views of my informants, I must risk my methodological integrity and face 'the perceived danger of interdisciplinarity' (Prato and Pardo 2013, 94). The combination of these three cases offers a holistic perspective of Seoul as an intersection of an ultramodern hypertechnologized society and ancient cultural roots. Before I turn to the case studies, I shall discuss the manner in which Seoul dwellers experience vernacular religion.

Religious Experience in the City

As I have said, it would be unrealistic to separate the mode of living that utilizes ancient concepts and beliefs from the one that offers technological innovation. Instead, I offer an analysis that includes both within the term 'tradition', following Henry Glassie's suggestion that this word represents ways of using the past to create a future (1995, 395). Koreans who reside and travel in the urban maze of Seoul are exposed to tradition through structures and the activities held in them. A shared understanding of local customs serves as common ground for most Seoulites. These traditions encapsulate many symbols stemming from a collective (somewhat imagined) past that continuously develops and adapts to their densely populated South Korean present.[1]

A city such as Seoul is so dense that a person can hardly fathom it as real. Steve Pile observes that for many city dwellers the masses of people project a ghost-like quality making the city a kind of phantasmagoria (2005, 20). At the same time, this dreamlike life, which is so far from the primordial human state, might create a need to feel supported by beliefs in the supernatural. Mysticism can fit the confused personal experience of a city dweller, as Pile suggests after discussing voodoo in New Orleans and vampires in Singapore (2005, 72).

Yumin, a university professor who lives on her own near her parents' apartment, related her disappointment at her mother's belief in shamanic practitioners. She told me how her family pressured her to marry and how, in order to maintain a 'decent face', she had to hide that she did not reside in her parents' home. She did not feel the urge to marry because she was afraid that a husband might object to her prestigious full-time job. Furthermore, witnessing how gravely the death of her uncle had affected her aunt had added to Yumin's feeling that married life could harm her. Her mother consulted with a *manshin* on how to improve the situation of her grieving sister and unmarried daughter. The *manshin* offered to conduct secret services in the hills around Seoul without the family's participation. She also demanded a modest fee. Yumin recognized that the relationship with the *manshin* appeased her worried mother but she thought that other practitioners were fake and 'money seekers'. In many stories I heard the same inclination to state that a certain familiar *manshin* is a good person who wants to help people, while subscribing to the prevalent

stigma attached to the practice in general. Divination and spiritual mediation are intersubjective, especially in a situation that allows diverse attitudes to exist side by side, as is the case in Seoul's urban culture. Ingold rejects the idea that we occupy an 'intersubjective space marked out by our mental representations' (1993, 154). But even if there is ontological existence in urban spaces, the same objects can be understood differently by various city dwellers and policy-makers. The amount of time spent by each individual in observing, construct-ing and commenting on urban landscape marks, such as shamanic shrines, might create a differential reaction to the same experience. In Seoul, some city dwellers, such as Yumin's mother, use establishments of vernacular religion regularly and are glad to find these wherever they go in the city; others, such as Yumin, find the expressions of ancient beliefs unfit for their modern/Christian/ scientific perspectives. Prejudice against vernacular religious practices contin-ues to exist in significant parts of Korea's society (Kendall 1985; Kim C. 2003).

The discomfort experienced by some of Seoul's urbanites in relation to *manshin* and fortune tellers stems from both ideas and materiality. Diviners, shamans, fortune tellers and other spiritual healers use every advertisement venue available, including the Internet (Sarfati 2016). These new media of information transmission enhance the word-of-mouth system and increase the possibility of chance encounters between city dwellers and *manshin*. Controversial ideologies, such as the vernacular religion displayed in the streets, might cause emotional distress, but street patterns and geographical complex-ity can be even more disorienting (Jameson 1991). Route finding in Seoul is notoriously difficult because most streets have no name. While local taxi drivers are a trusted source of path finding who even know where the diviners' offices are located (they do not appear on GPS maps), *manshin* help their clients by placing subway posters and hanging signs along the way from the nearest sub-way station. Thus, individuals can choose a religious practitioner after seeing these promotional signs. This takes place in a situation where Seoul is charac-terized by the clutter of advertisements and small maps attached to walls and street signs. 'A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there- to the sights, sounds, and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage' (Ingold 1993, 156). If we look at the city from a 'theoretical perspective of comprehending the urban from a phenomenological platform as a "lived space" ' (Channa 2013, 212), we can see how the extensive visibility of vernacular religion in the city adds to the character of Seoul and to the experiences that it offers. 'Urban society cannot be seen so "impersonalised" that existing social and political set-ups including sacred elements cease to operate; deep-rooted social and cultural elements, and their political ramifi-cations, are evident in the way in which resources and space are distributed in urban areas and in which urban dwellers live their lives' (ibid.).

Rapidly changing cityscapes house a multitude of simultaneous events. Some *manshin* move into the downtown area, while others move outwards to the suburbs; in one square a shamanic *kut* ritual is held, while in another there

is a catholic mass. This polyphonic quality is apparent in the material existence and constant production of the city's lived landscape. Ingold (1993: 160) compares life in the city to an orchestra. Extending this metaphor, we could search for the producers, players and conductors of the urban materialization of folk belief in Seoul. In the cases discussed below, these considerations are taken into account when exploring how vernacular religion affects the cityscape.

Divination Booths in Downtown Seoul

About a month before each New Year's Day, Seoul's downtown is flooded with cloth or polyester tents and booths housing hundreds of fortune tellers. Divining one's future before each New Year is an ancient and documented practice in Korean culture. In village settings, people had to choose from a few known practitioners who could divine the future. In the city, this practice has evolved into large temporary camps housing diviners of all sorts, who cater for clients who have little if any previous acquaintance with them (Fig. 28.1).

The tents are located in central plazas, notoriously near T'apgol Park, and they multiply before the New Lunar Year (around February). Such spatial expressiveness demonstrates that Seoul allows its dwellers to practise a mass materialization of emotions and religious engagement. The stories of clients and practitioners convey religious eclecticism and tolerance. For a few weeks, the whole range of Korean vernacular religions is on display in a mixed

Fig. 28.1   A line of temporary divination tents near T'apgol Park in downtown Seoul

community where *manshin* and various other practitioners work side by side with no visible contempt. Such diviners normally work inside their offices and houses, located throughout town, and especially in neighbourhoods outside the old city walls, because of the aforementioned nineteenth-century ban. More recently, a 'divination café' phenomenon has sprung up in various entertainment areas, such as the Apgujŏng Rodeo Street and Hongdae University Quarter. The New Year month is the peak of their business and many venture into public spaces in search for more clientele. The municipality accepts this practice as a part of the urban experience of Seoul and as a need of its dwellers, and these squatters are not evicted.

Various divination methods have been employed in Korea, including kinds of astrology, analysis of spatial combinations of coins, sticks or rice thrown by the client, reading facial feature, hands and eyes, and even recently imported traditions such as tarot cards. Even people who see themselves as non-religious and do not practice any particular creed in their daily lives can be seen visiting such diviners before making crucial decisions such as marriage, establishing a business or choosing a college. Janelli (1980) shows how fortune tellers try to make predictions that would fit their clients' life based on background information that they solicit during fortune telling sessions. The reputation of diviners might be harmed if their divinations do not materialize. The commodification of this practice includes various models of interaction, some egalitarian, while others can be considered as done mostly for profit (Kim D. 2015).

Changing the landscape through the mass cooperation of individuals is not exclusive to the urban landscapes of Korea. Many rural towns host large-scale festivals each year, where thousands gather for a few days of traditional music, performance, food and crafts, all arranged in white tents in an open public space. Nourished by these traditional temporary space arrangements, Seoul's practitioners of vernacular religion prepare their tents in downtown Seoul before the New Year. If only a few people would place such divination tents in the streets, the effect on the cityscape would be minor. However, the landscapes of the mass divination tent camps in several central spots downtown reflect how 'the city is overdetermined spatially' (Pile 2005, 172): one cannot walk in downtown Seoul before the New Year without noticing the activity generated around the tents. Vernacular religion makes itself present in the city through this mass event. A tourist office slogan coined by the Korean government asserts that Seoul is the 'Soul of Asia'. Pile argues: 'What is real about cities is the sheer expressiveness and passion of its life' (Pile 2005, 1–2). Seoul's expressiveness around New Year's Day demonstrates that it allows its dwellers to materialize a mass iteration of emotions and religious engagement over a long period of time. This might be the city's uniqueness and soul.

Sites of Shamanic Rituals in the City

Seoul is a huge metropolis where 25 million people reside across an urban stretch that has extended to include Inch'ŏn, Suwŏn and similar subway-connected suburbs about 40 kilometres away from the city's centre. People

from all over Korea have been migrating to Seoul in increasing numbers since the 1950s. This has created an area with a multiregional population where *manshin* who practice *kut* styles from various geographic origins now reside close to each other. Most of these urbanized migrants cannot travel often to their hometown shrines. When they settled in the Seoul area, they had to find new places to perform. Many sacred mountain shrines are now on the outskirts of Seoul or even in its suburban residential areas.

Until the 1970s, *kut* rituals were usually held at the clients' house or at a communal village shrine (Kendall 1985). In Seoul, the municipal law against noise has prevented most *manshin* from practiaing at their clients' homes or in their own apartments (Kendall 1996). Only short quiet rituals and advising sessions are performed in residences. While the anti-noise law intended to eliminate or reduce shamanic activity in general, as was officially stated in the government-promoted 'New Community Movement' in the 1970s, it has simply resulted in a change of location. Rental shrine rooms, like the one described at the start of this chapter opening, were established on mountain slopes in and around Seoul and the practice continued. These privately owned shrines have few neighbours who might complain about the noise. The locations are chosen in relation to beliefs in supernatural entities, such as mountain gods.

Most *manshin* have a shrine that they prefer, often a specific room within one structure, where they practise whenever possible. Such shrines are often located in a row of roughly constructed rooms that from the outside look like a small industrial structure or improvised residential place. Several have been installed in premises previously occupied by restaurants that had closed as a result of misfortunes, such as fire or death on the premises, which made them unfit for business but suitable for shamanic practices.[2] Such a place must have a large kitchen, sufficient to feed *manshin*, their clients and the audience throughout the event. In a central place in the courtyard there are sacred trees marked with colourful cloth streamers and an altar with bottles of alcoholic drinks, sweets and other offerings. Improvement in public transportation and increased ownership of private cars makes worship on mountains easy and combines aspects of pilgrimage with *kut* rituals held outside the residential areas. This new trend does not encourage worship of house gods in situ, a practice that has been declining anyway with temporary urban residence patterns.

Owners of rental shrines are usually not *manshin* but their relatives or unrelated entrepreneurs. Female cooks help to arrange offering altars and fold costumes during and after rituals. When many helpers are needed for a specific rite, they are often recruited among the shrine's workers. For example, in the *tari-kut*, at least four helpers are needed to hold the half-torn ends of cloth bridges that symbolize the connection between the living and the dead. The *manshin* then rips the long white cloths apart by walking through them in a symbolic act of detaching the deceased from their relatives and transferring their souls peacefully to the other world. The cooks regard their help in this ritual act as a meritorious privilege. They contribute to helping the spirits of the deceased and in return these spirits will watch over them in the future. Male

employees in shrines serve as porters and butchers, who come to the site of animal sacrifice to cut the carcass after the initial offering has been made. Pieces of meat are taken to the shrine and some parts, such as the head, are usually cooked in the kitchen and then brought back to the altar (Fig. 28.2).

The shrine also serves as a retail point for goods used during *kut*, such as caffeinated soft drinks and cigarettes, which are priced higher than in ordinary shops. Cooking, handling the meat, serving the *manshin* and the audience, and discarding offerings as instructed by *manshin* used to be tasks performed by the family sponsoring the ritual. However, contemporary urban rituals are more private in nature, with less involvement of family and community. The extensive support from cooking to burning the artefacts cannot be fulfilled by the handful of ritual sponsors. Rental shrines' staff now undertake these supporting roles, thus becoming cultural professionals who are knowledgeable in the ritual norms of various styles and geographical origins.

ANCIENT SHRINES IN CONTEMPORARY USE

The demolition, relocation or preservation of ancient shrines in the city has been tightly related to historical, political and religious discourses relevant at the time when a decision was made about each shrine's site. The views of city dwellers on these issues can differ from those of planners and policy-makers, who sometimes seem to ignore the fact that the landscape should be conceptualized as a cultural process that affects individuals (Lee 2012). Some shrines

Fig. 28.2   Meat offerings in a *kut* ritual at a rental shrine in the north of the city

have been in their present locations for many years, maintaining more or less their original form. Such is the Kuksa shrine (*kuksadang*), which was mapped and documented in the early 1900s when, as I have mentioned, the Japanese colonizers moved it from Mt. Nam (*namsan*) to its current location on Mt. Inwang (*inwangsan*) (Grayson 1992). Unlike newer shrines, Kuksadang has only one room for rent and more rooms cannot be added. Several officially acknowledged ancient gods' paintings are displayed inside, and a metal sign near the entrance tells the history and significance of the shrine and the paintings. Inwangsan is close to downtown Seoul, and Kuksadang can be reached in less than an hour's walk from the central government complex or City Hall. In the fall of 2007, the structure underwent renovation that forced the owners to close it for a few weeks. This kind of renovation is costly because a designated national heritage site requires that the traditional features of the structure be maintained, including handmade roof tiles and carved wood facades.

Inwangsan is considered to be a sacred mountain where, overlooking the urban maze, worshippers prostrate in front of large boulders called *sŏnbawi*. Springs revered for their healing capacities draw people to climb the mountain with backpacks full of empty bottles to be filled and taken down for relatives or clients. Water plays important roles in the purification process that precedes and follows *kut. Manshin* wash before, during and after rites, offerings are ritually cleaned with water, and water is served to the spirits on offering tables. Even today, natural water sources are preferred for these tasks. Im (1996) describes how villagers prepared for *kut* by bathing in the river regardless of freezing winter conditions. Seoul's municipality acknowledges this belief. It has placed signs indicating *yaksu* (medicine water) along the hilly paths leading to the springs and erected a mountain-water drinking fountain in the playground of Sajik Park, at the foot of Inwangsan, below Kuksadang. A sign in Korean tells of the water's origins and warns that it has not been treated and might not be suitable for drinking. Passers-by drink the water from the fountain, while others climb higher to get it straight from the source on the mountain.

Mountain gods (*sanshin*) are important deities in Korea's vernacular cosmology. The attribute of Sanshin is a tiger. Usually, this large predator is lying beside or under the anthropomorphic figure of the god. In some paintings, the tiger represents Sanshin with no humanlike depiction. On Inwangsan, the mountain where Kuksadang is now located, there is a Shamanic-Buddhist village. The gate to this complex is right beside a ten-year-old building complex that begins a few hundred yards below, at the Tongnimun subway station. The first houses of the village, next to the parking lot, have been decorated with the typical Sanshin tiger and other religious symbols (Fig. 28.3).

When *kut* rituals are held in Kuksadang, the *manshin* bring the ritual artefacts to this parking lot and hire porters to haul the goods in a long flight of more than 100 tall steps. It takes only a few minutes to walk up from the parking lot to the shrine from that side of the mountain. On almost every visit to this shrine, I met *manshin* and viewed their rituals, including the most famous

Fig. 28.3 A house in Kuksadang Buddhist village with a painted wall of the Sanshin tiger

and fierce sequence where the practitioners stand on sharp blades (*chaktu*). Kuksadang is not threatened by urban development despite its proximity to new apartment complexes because it has been designated as an important heritage site, probably also because of its symbolic role in the post-colonial memory of the city.

Another ancient shamanic shrine is the Kǔmsǒngdang shrine, less than a mile away from Kup'abal subway station, a 20-minute ride from downtown Seoul. The shrine had been functioning since the nineteenth century, until a few years ago, when a massive construction project called New Town began tearing the hills down.[3] By law, a construction project of this scale requires an assessment of the historical and archaeological value that might be destroyed during the work. This is part of the plan to have Seoul designated as a World Heritage City, a title bestowed by UNESCO on cities where important structures are properly preserved and maintained. The Kǔmsǒngdang shrine was about to be demolished by the builders of New Town long after the academic assessments of the valuable structures in the area had been handed to the city officials. The shrine was simply not in the list of structures that deserved preservation. The scholars who prepared the survey thought that it was an unimportant crumbling site of an undesirable superstitious practice. A non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to the preservation of historical sites, Prof. Yang Chongsǔng, then a senior curator at the National Folk Museum, and several journalists joined forces to fight the New Town plan to

demolish the shrine. They produced a book with a survey of the historically valuable artefacts in the building and gave this publication to the relevant people and offices. Parts of their academic analysis of cultural meanings and values attached to that site were published as articles in large newspapers.[4] In early 2007, after the city had already reversed its original resolution and decided to keep the building, it demanded that the builders donate money for the preservation efforts and change their plans in order to keep the structure in its original location. As can be imagined, the entrepreneurs were not happy about this development. Not only were they to rework the whole construction plan but they also had to accept that a shamanic shrine, considered by many Koreans as a dangerous place, would stay on their premises. This could mean a drop in the sales of the apartments and value depreciation.

When I visited the place in November 2007, a tall metal wall enclosed the shrine. However, there were several places where one could easily crawl underneath it or squeeze between the planks. Many ritual artefacts have disappeared from the house, and the site manager said that while he knew that people had been coming in through the adjacent hillside, it was not his duty to guard the place. Prof. Yang's anger and the fierce protests of a well-known NGO leader and civic movement activist were of little avail. Prof. Yang had told me earlier that the city offered to purchase the artefacts from the owners of the shrine, but they demanded an outrageous sum equivalent to several hundred thousand US dollars. As a result, these objects were declared 'important city assets', which means that the city would be their guardian but not their official owner. This would allow the city to keep the items free of charge and display them in the shrine once its preservation and renovation was complete. However, the authorities could not remove the objects before the restoration works began and the shrine was left unguarded. During a visit to the construction site, Prof. Yang and the activist argued for a crooked old sacred tree that was left outside the fenced area to be included in the preservation plan. They explained their idea to the construction director and charted their plans for its preservation. They also noted many deviations from the conservation regulations, such as reduced distances between the preserved site and high-rise buildings. Their plea did not seem to concern the director. The meeting took place outside, on the muddy construction ground, and was conducted in very formal language, at times involving angry tones and mutual accusations.

In the summer of 2015, the neighbourhood was a lively urban suburb with shops, streets and many apartment buildings. The shrine has become a beautiful closed wooden feature inside the neighbourhood, to be opened only for authorized visitors and scholars. The crooked tree was gone. The paintings and ritual artefacts were taken away to storage (Fig. 28.4).

The *manshin* who had been using the Kŭmsŏngdang shrine as their regular worship site were no longer allowed to use it. Many other such cases have been documented throughout the city. Some sacred paintings exhibited in the National Folk Museum of Korea or in private galleries came from shrines that were demolished for urban development as early as the 1970s (Kendall et al.

Fig. 28.4 Kŭmsŏngdang preserved shrine in the New Town suburb of Seoul

2015). Thus, the destruction of sacred sites is also linked to the displacement of precious old artefacts and ritual practices. As Seoul extends into hills and mountains where *manshin* work, more such shrines might be destroyed or closed down.

The Kŭmsŏngdang shrine story ended on a somewhat optimistic tone when, in May 2016, it was reopened as the Shamanism Museum. Prof. Yang's own private collection—the one that I visited with the embassy official in 2014—is exhibited there, sponsored by the regional neighbourhood office. This has been transformed from a site of superstitious spiritual activity to a respectable cultural representation arranged according to Western museum standards, where labelling and historical explanations have allowed the municipality to embrace the structure. Aiming to promote visits to this neighbourhood, the museum's opening was attended by various officials and scholars and was covered by the media.

Vernacular Religion in Media Landscapes

Seoul dwellers' eager consumption of media products makes the mass media an integral part of urban behaviour, especially because most commuters use digital media products during their long journey to work. Hand-held screens have been common in South Korea from the early 2000s and allow subway and bus passengers to watch films and television drama, and play video games while they commute. The bus and subway companies have upgraded their services to

include fast Wi-Fi that enhances the use of online media during travel. Jason Mittell ([2003](), 36) argues that for television audiences, 'hierarchies between programs and genres are one of the primary ways in which television viewers situate themselves among media texts and their social locations'. An examination of the Korean media reveals a change in the genres that host practitioners of vernacular religion, which can be interpreted as a change in social perspectives. In the years 2002–2008, most diviners whom I watched on television were either the topic of a scholarly documentary programme that presented them as part of a vanishing tradition, or interviewed in humorous talk shows that presented them in a somewhat sardonic manner. I recall especially a New Year's divination session by a *manshin* interviewed in his shrine. The film crew emphasized the colourful lights, making it look more like a bar than a professional advising facility; the questions were posed in a mocking tone; and the editing was jittery and added to the grotesque depiction of the diviner. *Manshin* have often been shown in rituals using fast-forward editing, which creates a humoristic depiction of the practice. Some films, such as *Kwishini Sanda* (director Kim Sangjin 2004), presented vernacular religion as charlatanism. This film included in that scope shamanic practices, Buddhism, geomancy and Christian exorcism.

The increased representation of vernacular religion in various genres of television talk show, drama series and thriller in Korea from around 2010 testifies to the fact that divination and shamanism are no longer considered a marginal social category; rather, they are celebrated as an exotic yet relevant part of contemporary culture and heritage. In the talk show *Yi Sŭngyŏn with a Hundred Women* (2012–2013 on Story On TV), *manshin* were part of an extensive advising panel that included interior decorators, *p'ungsu* (geomancy) specialists and psychologists. In *Job Stories* (2011–2013 on TV Chosŏn), diviners through astrology and retina, *manshin*, palm readers and others were introduced and consulted as professionals, focusing on each participant's biography and abilities. *The Exorcist* (2008 and 2012 on tvN) was a thriller documentary where each episode was dedicated to deciphering an unsolved murder, often with the help of spirit mediums who embodied the deceased. Television dramas and films also focus increasingly on vernacular beliefs and practices.

Fortune Saloon (*Ch'ŏngdam Posal*, director Kim Chinyŏng 2009) is a film about a 'posh' divination parlour located in the expensive Kangnam ward in Seoul. There, several fortune tellers work using various divination styles. The film ridicules some divination practices outside the 'saloon' as a mere money-making business. For example, when the main protagonist visits a street fortune teller, he predicts that there will be rain and sells her an old and half-broken umbrella. After she leaves, he is shown looking at the newspaper's broadcast saying: 'The weather report brings me good money. It worked again!' Despite this cynical remark, that scene and other moments in the film demonstrate that the main characters, who work as fortune tellers, are sincere believers and clients of other *manshin* and diviners. This film's location in an area notorious for housing many diviners' offices tells us that while the media's

depiction is not necessarily an unbiased documentation of reality, it is closely related to urban lifestyle in contemporary Seoul.

Vernacular Religious Landscapes in Seoul

Several ethnographies have demonstrated that spiritualistic vernacular religious practices can be inseparable from post-industrial societies. Howard (2011) has studied the Internet activity of end-of-the-world-theory believers in the USA. New media and trance mediums in various research sites, including Europe, were discussed in an edited volume on the topic (Behrend et al. 2015). The vernacular religious landscape of Seoul debunks the assumption, still common in public discourse in Korea and elsewhere, that vernacular practices of possession and exorcism decrease in places saturated with technology and scientific education. In Seoul, such activities are embedded in the daily experiences of millions, and even those who do not engage actively in shamanic rituals usually perform ancestor rites and divination. The extensive use of street signs, commercials and promotional billboards by *manshin* and other diviners entices Seoul dwellers to establishments where religious services are offered. This cultural trait is visible on any city commute. Flooding Seoul with divination tents before the New Year, advertising shamanism online and in print, and broadcasting films and television programmes with spiritual mediators and diviners as consultants creates a sense of social acceptance of practices that were considered in earlier modern times superstitious and harmful. Even old shrines can sometimes be saved from demolition during the city's constant reshaping and extension.

The New Community Movement, initiated by the Korean government in the 1970s, saw vernacular religion as a marker of undeveloped rural residence patterns (Kendall 1985). It strived to abolish such practices in its attempt to modernize the Korean countryside. Paradoxically, in the early twenty-first century it is urban Korea that hosts most of this vernacular religion. When I first began my fieldwork in 2005, I had a naïve idea of anthropological fieldwork. However, while looking for a fieldwork site, I kept hearing the same advice from village people, owners of religious goods store, scholars and even shamans, 'the best practitioners live in Seoul'. My research shifted to ethnography at urban sites because most *manshin* who become successful want to move to the city, just like most of South Korea's population. The rural areas have been decreasing in population while more than a half of the country lives in the three largest metropolises: Seoul, Pusan and Daegu. In the summer of 2016, I walked in downtown Seoul and looked at the signs announcing *manshin* offices. Their numbers seemed to have increased since I first began to observe them a decade earlier. Conducting ethnography in an urban setting changed my perception of the anthropologist's quest. I came to understand that learning about a society that has come to be centred in huge metropolises demands a more fragmented, maybe nomadic, attitude to fieldwork. Furthermore, it requires awareness and analysis of the media. I did my best to maintain

ethnographic qualities in my work that, as asserted by Herzfeld (2013, 119), 'characteristically rests on the demonstrated achievement of *intimate relations with informants*, regardless of the kind of site involved (multiple, local, linear, or even electronic)'. By doing just that, the contemporary entwinement of vernacular religion in the lives of Seoulites unfolds and tells how a city can create a unique character through its ever adapting traditions and their management by individuals and institutions.

NOTES

1. Seoul is still inhabited mainly by ethnic Koreans, with only about 4% of non-Koreans.
2. Such are the rental shrine of Sŏ Kyŏng-uk in Yŏngju near Seoul and the Puk'ansan kuksadang shrine in the north-west of Seoul.
3. The project's name in Korean is also New Town, transliterated but not translated into the Korean language. The use of English in the name marks the project as innovative and sophisticated.
4. Newspaper items include a series of articles in Segyeilbo on 11 January 2005, p. 30, 12 January 2005 and 13 January 2005, p. 8, and an Internet item, including a video caption at Dongailbo on 13 November 2007, available online at www.donga.com/fbn/output?f=j_s&n=200711130151&main-1 (accessed 1 December 2007).

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