

# Healing through Gender Inversion in Korean Possession Trance Rituals

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*Figure 1. Manshin Kim Nam-sun divining the future, while possessed by the spirit of a historic general. Kut ritual, Seoul, August 2015. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)*

“You see, when I wear this white makeup and paint my lips dark red, *uri halmōni* [our grandmother] is happy,” says Kim Min-su, a handsome Korean man in his late 20s, as he holds a round mirror decorated with pink flowers and scrutinizes the thick makeup he is applying. He wears a white underskirt typical of the traditional *hanbok* (Korean outfit featuring a puffed skirt and top usually made of bright silk) worn by women. When he is satisfied with his face, he puts on a second layer of silk skirt and top. “It is halmōni’s taste, not mine,” he says, pointing at the puffy skirt. This hanbok is white with lacy patterns on the V-neck collar.<sup>1</sup>

Just 20 minutes earlier, Kim entered his *shindang* (gods’ shrine) wearing sweatpants, a T-shirt, and no makeup. He looked like any ordinary Korean man of his age. His shrine is located in a fancy neighborhood south of the Han river, which crosses Seoul, and he often calls it his “office” when discussing the rented apartment where he regularly receives clients to per-

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1. Interviews with Kim Min-su quoted in this article were held in Seoul in July and August 2014.

form spiritual mediation. Now, after applying all the makeup, he looks more like a middle-aged Korean *ajuma* (auntie) than a young man.<sup>2</sup>

I met Kim during my summer 2014 fieldwork with South Korean practitioners of spiritual mediation. Men dressing as women to perform shamanic rituals is a daily occurrence. In some other contexts, cross-dressing is perceived as a symptom of mental disorder (Oh and Oh 2017). Cross-dressing is practiced in pop-related performances, such as drag shows, mostly in the Itaewon neighborhood in Seoul and in some television programs (Yoon 2015). Moreover, pride parades have been held in central Seoul recently, demonstrating that perceptions are changing (Tai 2018). Still, these cross-dressing events are marginal in Korea, where homosexuality bears a social stigma. Kim, however, is an initiated spiritual mediator who practices possession trance (*manshin*) and, as such, during religious performances he can dress to suit the perceived gender of the possessing spirit.<sup>3</sup> For centuries before recent glimmerings of change regarding public perception of gender fluidity and transgender people, Korean shamanism (*musok*) has been a designated social arena of gender and sexual flexibility.<sup>4</sup>

Musok mainly addresses problems of physical, social, and mental health, explaining them as indications of supernatural intervention (Oak 2010:97). Around 80% of the manshin are women, and historical data suggests that this gender ratio has persisted for centuries.<sup>5</sup> The work of manshin as healers in their traditional communities—and the social roles that they offered women who sought power beyond that allotted by the patriarchal culture—has been addressed in many research studies (for example, Bruno 2002; Harvey 1979; Kendall 1985; Kim 1981). Female manshin were stigmatized for performing in front of men, their insubordination to male superiors such as fathers and husbands, and their close interaction with various

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2. This research was supported by a Field Research Fellowship from the Korea Foundation (2007, 2014) and several travel grants from the Israeli International Science Contacts Foundation. All translations and transliterations from Korean to English are mine. I use the McCune-Reischauer transliteration system, but write *shi* instead of *si* to facilitate proper pronunciation. The terms *South Korea* and *Korea* stand for the Republic of Korea. Several terms, such as *manshin* and *kut* are used as both singular and plural, following the Korean language rules. Kim Min-su is a pseudonym that he asked me to use, because many of his acquaintances are not aware of his shamanic activities. The other practitioners are identified by their real names, or as anonymous following their request.

3. In general, practitioners of spiritual mediation in Korea are called *mudang*. However, this is an umbrella term used for two kinds of very different religious performers. One is an inherited religious role called *sesupmu*, which involves prayers, dance, and chants. The other, which I discuss in this article, relates to practitioners who employ possession trance techniques to speak the words of supernatural entities and to negotiate with them. These are called manshin (lit. ten thousand spirits and gods).

4. *Musok* and *shamanism* are much contested terms. Scholars debate whether the single term “shamanism” can describe diverse spiritual practices worldwide (Sarfati 2016:203n2). *Musok* is controversial because it was one of the terms used by politicized Japanese colonial anthropologists in the early 20th century, and some scholars think that it is too closely associated with negative cultural biases. Another term used in Korean is *mugyŏ*, but *gyŏ* implies organized religions rather than vernacular ones. Since *musok* commonly describes spiritual mediation practice in Korean-language research, I prefer it despite its shortcomings.

5. See Kendall (1985) for a thorough discussion of female dominance in *musok*.

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clients, including men. However, the unique position of male manshin (also called *paksu* or *paksu mudang*) has seldom been addressed in depth, particularly their participation in otherwise stigmatized cross-gender behaviors and homosexuality. Most research about musok mentions briefly that paksu are homosexuals or “transvestites” (for example, Kendall 1985:27). Paksu mudang have sometimes been called *bwarang*, the title of legendary warrior-artists from the Shilla period in ancient Korea (57 BCE–935 CE), who were often categorized as homosexuals (Yu 1975; Rutt 1961). Since the 10th century, adherence to neo-Confucian ideologies with strict gender boundaries limited acceptance of public same-sex relationships. Yet homosexuality is prevalent in the musok community. I have not heard of transgender paksu, although gender affirming surgery has existed in Korea for several decades. This suggests that possession is accepted as a condition that does not necessarily affect the possessed person’s identity at other times. Moreover, many male and female manshin maintain heterosexual relationships.

In my study, I observed and interviewed eight paksu to learn how their spiritual vocation has affected their performance of gender roles in ritual and in their everyday lives. I explored how, through musok performance, they legitimized behaviors (such as cross-dressing) that are often seen as signs of mental illness. I was especially interested in how initiation as a practitioner of musok enables human beings who are thought of as sick or weak to transform into productive healers even while performing the acts that labeled them “ill” or “mentally unfit” in the first place.

I learned how such “mental illness” can be attributed to supernatural intervention and an individual’s calling and then healed through the performance of theatrical shamanic rituals (*kut*). The process is supervised by an experienced manshin, who herself successfully underwent a similar personal transformation. This cultural work, through which behaviors and feelings are actively transformed from what are often considered social and personal aberrations into useful tools of religious practice, is the core of musok male practitioners working in a female-dominated domain.

I use the present tense in my discussion of musok because it is far from being a bygone or vanishing tradition. It is widely practiced in contemporary, hypertechnologized, urban South Korea (Sarfati 2014, 2016). Manshin perform possession trances on every hillside surrounding Seoul, mostly in rented shrines. They appear on TV talk shows to divine the futures of individuals and the nation, and are brought in as special advisors on TV programs that dig into unsolved murder cases, such as the 44-chapter reality thriller *The Exorcist*, which aired on the TvN cable channel in 2008/09, and its 2012 season (Yi 2008; Y. Kim 2012). They also maintain a vivid presence on Facebook and Twitter (Sarfati 2016).

While South Korea is one of the world’s leading economies and among the top producers and consumers of media and new technologies, its citizens’ perspectives on gender, sexuality, and nonnormative behavior have evolved slowly. Korea is very patriarchal, perhaps the most misogynistic hypertechnologized society in the world (OECD 2020). Recent struggles for LGBTQ rights have been only moderately successful (Kim and Cho 2011; Henry 2020). In public discourse, homosexuality is referred to as a perversion and a sin (Kim 2016:91–100, 103). Out homosexuals cannot, in most cases, be hired for mainstream jobs. If they first conceal and later reveal their sexual orientation, they are fired or, at best, their careers suffer. Therefore, many gay Koreans marry gays of the opposite sex or lead a double life (Cho 2009). The Korean army (service in which is mandatory for all men) enforces psychological evaluation prior to recruitment, and “if the man shows he has homosexual tendencies, the man is labeled as ‘mentally handicapped,’ thus unfit to serve” (J. Kim 2012). If a gay soldier is outed, he must undergo mental treatment.

However, for a manshin the labeling is different, and gay paksu are spared hospitalization because their sexual orientation is perceived as coming from spirit possession. The health authorities let them be treated within the musok community. Kim Min-su calls his main possessing spirit “grandmother.” He says that she is the spirit of a famous manshin, and that he

became her regular venerator after incessant mystical dreams featuring her. She likes him to dress as a woman and enjoys it when he has male lovers. Male spirits also possess him during rituals, and when they do, he dresses and behaves as is expected of Korean men. Thus, cross-dressing is not interpreted as a personal choice, but rather as a demand from the possessing spirits. Female manshin likewise cross-dress when they embody male spirits. Notably, important historic figures and spirits of natural elements are mostly male, and therefore cross-dressing by female manshin during rituals is common.

While most female manshin cross-dress regularly, they are not stigmatized. I have never heard people criticize manshin for dressing like men when male spirits possess them. While some women manshin have female lovers, lesbianism is not mentioned in the discourse on musok, and there is little if any gossip related to sexual preferences among women manshin. I am especially interested in paksu because they form a unique, doubly marginalized group. In the already liminal practice of spiritual mediation in Korea, they are a gender minority. Their cross-dressing alarms Koreans more than that of their female counterparts, because male homosexuality was a crime until 2003 and is still very harshly criticized (Kim and Hahn 2006; Henry 2020). The very well-groomed, somewhat feminine appearance of many male stars in the entertainment business, such as the famous boy band BTS, does not signal broad social acceptance of homosexuality but rather is intended to make the boys sexually alluring to their female fans and to establish aesthetic norms of soft masculinity for heterosexual men (Oh and Oh 2017; Sun 2011). The outfits, makeup, and body movements of these icons, which might appear by Western standards to hint at homosexuality, do not mark them as gay in contemporary Korea (Schulze 2016). They are expected to be straight. This expectation is manifest in their videos, which show them with female partners, and their



*Figure 2. Manshin Kim Nam-sun balancing a tub full of raw meat, while possessed by the spirit of a historic general. Kut ritual, Seoul, July 2014. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)*



*Figure 3. In costume, male and female apprentices of Manshin Yi Hae-gyōng performing an outdoor section of a kut ritual while photographers document the event. Tamokri village, August 2014. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)*

public comments related to love and sexual preferences. By contrast, the cross-dressing of paksu mudang is perceived as representing feminine identities.

Cross-dressing and other gender-challenging behaviors are often the first signs that a person is destined to be a manshin, and prove instrumental in the initiatory healing of many manshin. Kim Min-su's love for feminine outfits since childhood was perceived as perverse by relatives; the manshin he consulted in his late teens said that it was a symptom of *shinbyŏng* (possession illness caused by spirits and gods). The cosmological reasoning for this behavior was possession by female spirits, and his adherence to their wishes led him to learn how to apply makeup and move gracefully. Since his early apprenticeship, Kim has worn elaborate female costumes during rituals and casual feminine outfits during breaks between ritual segments. The outfit that I saw him wear in our first meeting was a loose, pink silk two-piece suit embroidered with red roses that he then wore under his full performance attire. During rituals, when possessed by female spirits, he speaks in a high pitch, uses gentle gestures, and relates to female clients as if he were a woman, sometimes caressing them in a motherly, rather than sexual, fashion.

Several people mentioned to me that Kim loves men and shares his bed with them. Kim himself refrains from publicly stating his sexual preferences, and he does not openly lead a homosexual life. While his personal and professional lives are strongly entwined, his religious practice allows him to lead a liminal life, both within and outside mainstream Korean culture. The adaptability of musok to contemporary Korean circumstances is the source of its resilience and why it thrives as a transformative power in the lives of many.

## Illness and Healing in the Lives of Musok Practitioners

What can be healed through shamanic initiation in Korea? Which behaviors are considered a result of *shinbyŏng*? The life stories of many paksu help to answer this question. A 50-year-old paksu told me:

When I was a teenager I used to sneak into my sister's room and wear her clothes. When my mother once saw me like that, she threatened that if this did not stop, she would tell my dad. The next time, I was brought in front of my dad, who in his Confucian learned manner beat me with a stick. I understood that if I chose to keep on doing this, I'd better leave home [...]. After more than a year in Seoul as a drifter, working part-time manual jobs, I met a manshin. She told me that I was destined to become a musok practitioner.<sup>6</sup>

All the male and female manshin that I interviewed, except one whose mother was a manshin, told me that until they became musok initiates, their relatives told them that their unacceptable behaviors must stop or they would be expelled from their families. Several told me that they were sent to Christian "homosexuality healing" retreats (see also Kim 2016). When they felt that no solution could be found, some sought manshin advice. People who feel socially restrained, with little room to express their true selves, are the most typical *shinbyŏng* patients (see, for example, Kendall 1988b; Harvey 1979). As most of the manshin are women, their lower status and income are explained by their social position in a patriarchal, misogynistic society (Yi 1996). The story of Shin Myŏng-gi, a manshin I have observed since 2005, shows how even established practitioners might be prone to spiritual illness when gender biases limit their success.

Shin is a strong, hard-working person. She became a manshin in the 1990s after apprenticing to a famous *shinŏmŏni* (spirit mother). By 2007, she had a consultation office in a fancy

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6. All quotes from anonymous informants are from interviews conducted in Seoul during July and August 2014, and April 2017.



apartment in downtown Seoul. She was very proud that she had earned a master's degree in business and that her son was a graduate student in Japan. She was busy turning a country house in Chŏngju into a musok gallery featuring her extensive ritual paraphernalia that included paintings, costumes, and statues of gods and spirits, and was publishing her second book, which showcases calligraphic talismans she painted (Shin 2010). I was surprised that many local scholars expressed disapproval of these efforts, saying that Shin could not be both a scholar and a spiritual performer. Their words reflected gender biases as well as social role hierarchies: a female manshin is not supposed to produce cultural artifacts, which are the business of male scholars. Shin did not gain official recognition or sponsorship for her gallery. She was frustrated and physically exhausted. She had frequent urges to pray on mountains; she had dreams she interpreted as bad omens. In 2015, she closed her gallery and rented out most of her house, keeping only her home shrine, where she receives clients. Although she understood the sociopolitical constraints that had led to the gallery's failure, she thought that the main obstacle to success was lack of supernatural support. She was worried that continuing to push forward with the gallery and book writing might lead to illness or death. Instead, she immersed herself in religious activity and put aside her scholarly aspirations.

Like many other manshin, Shin has lived without a male partner since I met her in 2005, although she used to be married and had children. Being the spouse of a shinbyŏng patient or a manshin is perceived as difficult for men, because their wives do not submit to their supervision (Chang 1983). Several manshin told me that they refrain from sex with their husbands because the spirits forbid it. Divorce used to be rare in Korea and still bears a stigma. However, all the female manshin that I know (including those over 60) are single, divorced, or remarried, usually to assistants, clients, or business managers who appreciate their vocation, unlike their first husbands. Men who become paksu, especially those whose guardian spirit is female, are presumed to be homosexual, and are also often single or divorced. Despite this common perspective, around half of the paksu that I know and most of the manshin lead heteronormative lives.



*Figure 4. Manshin Kim Nam-sun dressed as the spirit of the seven stars of the great dipper. Kut ritual, Seoul, August 2015. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)*

Such a cultural climate emphasizes the power of musok performance in conceptually reframing what most social actors view as deviant, obscene, or otherwise unacceptable. Clearly, not every illness is shinbyŏng. Afflictions that are blamed on evil and vengeful spirits sometimes can be healed in a simple exorcism, and all my manshin and paksu informants report trying this kind of ritual at some point in their lives before agreeing to be initiated. Clearly, most musok rituals do not end with the initiation of the clients, but simply with a promise of healing or solving the problem.

Surveys conducted before the 1970s, when the Korean government tried to eradicate musok as a harmful superstition, suggested that more than a third of the rural Koreans who had been treated for schizophrenia and anxiety with shamanistic ceremonies reported being healed (Park 2012:44–45). An informal survey of the manshin patients that I met throughout my fieldwork, mostly residents of Seoul of all ages and walks of life, yielded similar findings. Many claimed to have been healed, and those less confident of full healing reported feeling better psychologically. For example, after having spoken with her deceased mother through a manshin's mediation, a 30-year-old interior decorator reported feeling relieved of much of her guilt related to her infrequent visits to her dying mother. In the ritual, the mother reassured her that she understood the demands of a career and did not hold a grudge. The theatricality of the event, including loud crying by the possessed manshin and long hugs with the daughter, added to the emotional effect.

There are more than 200,000 mudang registered in their professional association, Kyŏngshin yŏnhap (the Federation of Associations for the Respect of Beliefs), a number that reflects the strength of this tradition in contemporary Korea. The mudang work within today's moral and legal values: they do not sanction violence or criminal acts as god-driven. I have never heard my interlocutors excuse cases of manslaughter, theft, rape, or other hurtful activities as shinbyŏng. All the shinbyŏng behaviors that I have seen and heard of caused damage mostly to the afflicted person. Natural or accidental tragedies such as car crashes and fires can be blamed on angry spirits looking for attention, but not on a shinbyŏng patient.

Since the 1960s, scholars have discussed musok as practical psychotherapy, with the long and elaborate musok rituals (*kut*) as theatrical reiterations of life narratives that help heal psychological difficulties (Lee 1994:21). Such scholarly discourse analyzes possession using now-dated Western concepts such as hysteria, dissociative identity disorder, or neurotic defense strategies (21). Moreover, the World Health Organization defined possession trance in 1991 as a mental disorder but since the mid-1990s has rejected this classification, yet in Korea this is still often-times the medical diagnosis (Schlottmann 2018:5). This medically derived division separating the physical from the mental aspects of shinbyŏng fits Western dualism, but my manshin acquaintances see things differently. For many of my interviewees, visions and dreams are more disturbing than bodily manifestations such as paralysis and pain, and they assert that, had they not been initiated as manshin, they would probably have already died, despite the standard view of such symptoms as merely psychological.

Paksu Kim discusses cross-dressing and homosexuality as part of a broad range of psychological and physical symptoms of his now-healed shinbyŏng. In his teenage years, "I used to run away to the forests near my home and return after a couple of days. I dreamed that older people called me from the mountain top to serve them water and food. I would return half-starved and with a high fever." These uncontrolled excursions stopped after his initiation, because now he goes to the mountains voluntarily and understands this as a part of his regular veneration activity. Likewise, he does not regard himself as gay, and describes some young female manshin as sexually attractive suggesting that, at least in public, he plays a heterosexual role.

The boundaries that the spiritual explanation allows are more flexible than other cultural or medical perspectives regarding health and sexuality. Becoming a manshin or a paksu entails suffering social marginalization, but at the same time better understanding and control over one's life. As one 30-year-old male informant stated:

I did not see a way to continue my life while being gay. I did not understand why this tendency was so strong in me. I tried to meet nice girls, fall in love, and be married but just couldn't. I tried the sauna scene but found it too dangerous. What if someone saw me? I would surely be fired. It was there that I met an old paksu, who told me that I might be afflicted by the spirits.

When manshin exorcize gay men, they might embody a spirit who suggests that the “problem” cannot be solved and that they are meant to be paksu who venerate female spirits. While exorcism is typically expected to result in an end to nonnormative behavior, that is not the case for manshin.<sup>7</sup> In such cases the subject is considered healed not when symptoms are gone, but when they find an acceptable outlet.

Still, becoming a manshin complicates one's life, and most families that detect shinbyŏng symptoms in one of their members search for psychological and medical help first. Psychological treatment in contemporary Korea still carries a very strong stigma, and people usually seek treatment only for very severe symptoms. Medical treatment, for its part, has not been very successful in healing shinbyŏng. Some patients become aggressive and refuse to cooperate. This was observed even in ethnic Koreans living in the United States (Park 2012).

Korea's medically oriented culture creates unique niches for musok healing, especially in cases that medicine cannot treat successfully. Both practitioners and patients report that musok is usually the last resort, also for chronic physical ailments such as arthritis, or terminal conditions such as some cancers. A famous paksu told me, “I wish that more people approached me when their hardships began, and not after many years of failed medical treatments.” Thus, manshin do not see their practice as antiquated and irrelevant, but rather as current, empowering, and much needed. As initiated spiritual mediators, they find that characteristics that otherwise would have been condemned instead are the basis for their profession and a source of prestige.

## Cosmological Justifications for Nonnormative Behaviors

Shinbyŏng is explained as a manifestation of a supernatural intervention: supernatural entities choose certain humans as their personal attendants, and the chosen individuals begin to act according to the spirits' wishes. For these individuals, the asserted characteristics of the spirits—together with their adherence to and acceptance of the initiation ritual—transform the healed into a healer. The spirits that inhabit the manshin are part of the traditional musok cosmology.

Musok cosmology has a long-documented history and is also expressed in other vernacular religions as well as in folk theatre and dance. Yim, Janelli, and Janelli (1987) called it parallelistic, since it is polytheistic but not hierarchical. Supernatural entities gain different levels of importance in musok only in the context of a specific venerator's performed pantheon. A manshin's main spirit is their *momju* (personal governing entity). For example, Manshin Shin's *momju* is Queen Min, the wife of the last king of Korea, murdered in 1895 by the Japanese for working against them (Simbirtseva 1996). Being Queen Min's venerator is a source of spiritual power for Shin; as Queen Min she negotiates with other spirits for her clients' well-being.

One of the outstanding features of most worshipped entities is that they are not categorized as good or evil; they simply help or harm depending on the interaction. This is the reason that in Korea possession is not necessarily healed by expelling the spirit, as is done for Christian demonic possession or Jewish *dybbuk* possession (Bilu 2003, 2020; Boddy 1994). Shinbyŏng

7. Kendall (1988a:446) describes a similar continuity in possession after initiation in her observations from the 1970s.



healing is achieved while maintaining daily relationships with many possessing *shin* (spirits and gods). If the manshin achieves a mutual understanding with the spirits, the possession can be beneficial; the possessing spirits are responsible for all healing, divination, and blessings. The skillful manshin is a mediator who embodies the spirits, facilitating dialogue and negotiation between them and the possessed. During the ritual, the manshin moves back and forth between speaking the words of spirits, telling the clients what they can do to appease the spirits, and ordering the assistants to fetch certain artifacts for the rite. Such transitions are often discernable by the different kinds of speech levels (polite, formal, informal) used in each utterance, and the vocabulary chosen by the performer. The manshin plays both the role of the spirit and also of herself as a healer. Therefore, it is no surprise that paksu and manshin are expected to look and behave like the spirits that possess them. *Shimmyŏng*, the transformative state in which

ecstasy, trance, and possession occur during kut, is characterized as a theatrical “flow,” where the performer is fully absorbed in the act, in a manner that can potentially heal by creating harmony (Lee 1994:261).

In Korea rivers, mountains, old trees, and tall rocks are objects of worship. They are named as specific *shin*, such as *sanshin* (mountain god), who is the spirit of every hill and peak, known as a Buddhist healer and a merciful entity. Other *shin* are spirits of ancestors. Some are known for specific spiritual services. For example, *samsin* (three Buddhist spirits) help in conception and birth, while spirits of warriors and kings help in



Figure 5. Manshin Yi Hae-gyŏng possessed by *sanshin*, the mountain god. Kut ritual, Tamokri village, August 2014. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)

business and politics. Clients often choose practitioners based on their guardian spirits. When manshin and paksu advertise their services through the internet or subway posters, they usually emphasize their specialty by naming their venerated spirit and showing themselves wearing the outfit that represents that particular entity.

The entities that each manshin worships also affect the specific manifestation of their *shinbyŏng*. The most outstanding feature of humanoid spirits and gods, such as those venerated in musok, is that they have a clear gender. Only a few spirits appear as both male and female, depending on local versions of musok mythology and cosmology. Some famous spirits have a spouse, such as *sanshin manura* (mountain-god’s wife). Paksu might wear makeup if their momju is female. Likewise, female manshin might perform certain sexual gestures, such as thrusting their pelvises rhythmically back and forth toward a woman in the audience, jokingly imitating the male role in sexual intercourse during possession by a male deity. Such cross-gender manifestations are not perceived as abnormal within this cosmological framing.

The reasons that certain people experience *shinbyŏng* have interested many scholars and research shows it is often related to a traumatic experience. Youngsook Kim Harvey (1979) showed that abuse by a husband or the death of close kin triggered the illness in several of her manshin interviewees. Dong-kyu Kim (2012:138, 163) discussed cases where a long illness was a turning point leading to becoming a manshin. One of his informants had severe measles in childhood, after which she remembered that her peers began mocking her for

behaving strangely, which she later interpreted as becoming possessed. In musok terminology as expressed by my manshin acquaintances, however, such traumatic events are not the cause of the shinbyöng but its first symptom. In this view, the spirits instigate mishaps after trying in vain to attract the attention of the manshin-to-be through dreams and visions. By causing chaos in a person's life, the spirits try to make them realize that supernatural entities demand their service as spiritual mediators. Once a manshin or paksu has diagnosed why misfortune was haunting them and declared that they were destined to become spiritual mediators, they became apprentices. There is much to learn to master this complex art, and so afflicted apprentices join the work of a mentor for several years before opening an independent spiritual consultation office. They begin learning the essential musok traditions through close cooperation with the experienced practitioner until the shinömoni asserts that initiation is possible.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of homosexuality, initiation as a manshin allows for healing without stopping the “problematic” sexual activity. Rather, the healing entails reframing such behavior as a religious necessity. If a female spirit that possesses the paksu wishes to live with a man, then the paksu must appease her by heeding her desires. Ignoring the requests of spirits is believed to cause severe health deterioration. This is very different from the spiritual “homosexuality healing” offered by Protestant Christians in Korea. Kim Young-jin, the representative of the Congress Mission Council, who is dedicated to preventing homosexuality, stated, “we should decidedly tell homosexuality is wrong. However, instead of abhorring or hating them, we need to support and understand the pain and suffering of homosexuals in order for them to be cured and recovered” (in Kim 2016:91). In 2011, several right-wing Korean Christian groups announced plans for “a healing-recovery center in order to provide counseling and cure for homosexuals” (92). Such “Christian healing” does not allow ongoing gay relationships, as musok does. Musok believers view homosexuality more flexibly. If it is a constant tendency, spurred by the manshin's personal guardian spirit, then it is accommodated; but if it is a manifestation of possession by random intruding spirits, then it should vanish after proper exorcism. We might think that musok practitioners are free from such unwanted spirit possessions because they have



Figure 6. Manshin Kyerungsan Yaksaposal (lit. the healing manshin of Mt. Kyerung) advertising her services in a poster at Chegi subway station in Seoul, July 2007. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)

8. Shamanic initiation processes in other cultures are similar to those for the manshin (Eliade [1951] 2004).



Figure 7. Paksu Lee seated in his home shrine, Seoul, August 2014. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)

learned to control the spirits, but my interviewees say otherwise.

Paksu and manshin can suffer unwanted afflictions even after being healed of shinbyŏng. My interlocutors did not perceive this as rare or strange. Rather, their initiation ritual is only the first step in a long series of healing performances. Several manshin sponsor a large public performance every year to please their regularly worshipped spirits. Such performances are a constant reminder that the manshin has not been freed from the danger of involuntary possession, and public performances are interpreted as preventative measures.<sup>9</sup> In

fact, the performative aspect of possession rituals is present in almost every act of an ordained practitioner of musok, including daily life and chores, because the manshin's body is perceived as a *tang* (shrine) to the venerated spirits, which can embody them when needed. Thus, Kim Min-su's day begins with replacing the water in brass bowls at his home shrine and lighting incense and candles. These are his morning communication acts with supernatural entities such as halmŏni. After that, he might go shopping, run errands, or watch TV, but as he proceeds with other tasks, he is always on the lookout to see whether the supernatural is delivering personal hints. For example, when he was almost hit by a car in the busy streets of Seoul, he performed a spirit-appeasing rite. Having been afflicted by, and then cured of, shinbyŏng changed his life for good—a life that has become a series of both short and long healing ritual performances.

## Healing through Performance

The healing of shinbyŏng involves a series of ritual performances and is always an expensive affair, requiring the sponsorship of several kut with elaborate offering altars, props, hired musicians, and rented performance space. Kut performed for such healing last many hours, during which the manshin, audience, and apprentices experience communication with the supernatural. Unlike ethnographers of early modern Korea, I have rarely observed rituals that lasted more than a day. When the ritual performance is over, the experienced manshin sends the spirits away and returns to a more-or-less ordinary life, with no signs of possession.

Mastery of performance skills indicates the complete transformation from an unhealthy person to a healer. The initiation process is a gradual transformation of possession symptoms from unmanageable to expected, wanted, and self-governed. For example, instead of vanishing without a word for several days, as they commonly did during shinbyŏng, my interlocutors announce a pilgrimage to some mountain prayer sites. In recent times, these pilgrimages have become photo opportunities, feeding the manshin's social network pages with beautiful images of their mountain visits and rituals in the woods.<sup>10</sup>

9. Constant appeasing of spirits is also prevalent in Ethiopian *zar* possession (Bilu 2003).

10. Many manshin maintain active personal websites, blogs, and social network pages. I discuss this phenomenon in depth elsewhere (Sarfati 2016).



In August 2015, Manshin Kim Nam-sun performed a ritual for a group of clients who wanted to ensure that their deceased loved ones would prosper. The manshin called upon many important spirits to possess her. She brought expensive offerings such as imported liquor; she sang, danced, and played with sharp knives. The spirits, speaking through her, said that they were willing to help her clients' loved ones in their arduous afterlife path, thanks to the elaborate entertainment they were enjoying. As part of the ritual, Kim enacted what are considered male behaviors: she drank several shots of

Irish whiskey and sprayed the liquid between her teeth on some of the clients and smoked an entire package of cigarettes as a bunch, even placing the lit parts in her mouth as she smoked. She performed these exaggerated cross-gender acts because she was embodying a male spirit. During the ritual, this is a normative part of the show and an expected form of religious veneration. In the context of daily life, however, drinking and smoking are unthinkable for a Korean woman, especially one who is 60 years old. Indeed, when Kim handed out the lit cigarettes to the audience, she gave them only to the men, demonstrating her understanding of gender norms and her self-control while performing. Cross-gender acts like these abound in kut rituals, allowing the performers to ignore normative decorum within the bounded performance context, while still demonstrating by controlling their behaviors in daily life that they have been fully healed.

As discussed above, there are paksu whose momju are male, such as Yi Söng-jae, a famous practitioner over 60 years old who was designated as a living national treasure (*ingan munbwaje*), or a holder of an intangible cultural asset (*chungyö muhyong munbwaje poyuja*), which means a preserver of a specific kut ritual.<sup>11</sup> Because his momju is a male spirit, Yi does not wear makeup or female undergarments. He can, however, wear a feminine robe while performing possession by a female deity, and one of



Figure 8. Manshin Kim Nam-sun dressed as a male historic aristocrat, delivering blessing from the spirit possessing her, Kut ritual, Seoul, August 2015. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)



Figure 9. Paksu Yi Söng-jae blessing a female apprentice. Kut ritual, Seoul, July 2014. (Photo by Liora Sarfati)

11. See Yun (2015) for the designation process.

his famous performances includes dancing in a full Chosŏn queen's costume, albeit without makeup. He owns a very expensive costume designed after the painted depictions of queens from the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). They wore several layers of silk robes and elaborate headgear constructed of imitation braids twisted up and held with gemstones, gilded pins, and ribbons. On 13 July 2014, I observed him perform his most well-known masculine act. During the first ritual of a newly initiated female apprentice, in the yard of a rental shrine in the southeast outskirts of Seoul, he loaded a whole carcass of a pig on his shoulders and climbed a wooden staircase onto a tall platform. There, he walked on a sharp blade with his bare feet, one in front of the other, to deliver divinations from a powerful warrior's spirit. While standing on the blades bearing the pig, he shouted, "I [the warrior] appreciate the entertainment and bravery shown here and will provide wealth and good health to all of you [the audience] and to Pak [the newly initiated apprentice]." Kim Min-su, as well as many female manshin, also stands on sharp blades during rituals to bless and divine the future with the help of warriors' spirits. The performative act is determined by the gender of the spirit rather than the gender of the performer.

Kut entail extensive preparation and staging of the shrine and altars, orchestrated possession feats, ritual closure recitations, and altar disassembly. Apprentices become well versed in the work of musok by repeating the steps many times over several years. Paksu Yi, as well as other successful manshin I know, have more than 10 apprentices at a time, all in different stages of healing. They call them *shimadŭl* (lit. spirit-children). They rarely live in their masters' homes, as apprentices once did, and rarely all convene except for pilgrimage or kut preparation and performance. Therefore, the contemporary healing of shinbyŏng is not achieved through frequent daily encounters between the supervising practitioners and their spiritual children; rather, it is mostly achieved through rituals.

The first musok performance that most shinbyŏng patients encounter is an initial consultation with a senior manshin. In this short performance the manshin checks if the patient is afflicted by spirits by rattling brass bells, throwing uncooked rice on a divination plate, chanting, and discussing the situation with the patients and their companions. Some manshin state that they become possessed during these events, while others say they are "asking the spirits what is wrong with that person," or "notifying the gods that there is a problem." Oftentimes, such a consultation ends with offering the patient a *pujŏk* (amulet) and prescribing candles and incense. Not all the spirits that hover around an afflicted person want to transform the person into a spiritual mediator. Some are just looking for attention. If the consulting paksu or manshin thinks that the situation is more complicated, they might suggest holding a kut to appease the spirits. Yet it often happens that the manshin immediately recognizes the behavior demonstrated by the client as a symptom of a spiritual calling that requires shamanic initiation.

In that case, there is a series of individual healing performances, where the manshin begins to teach the initiate how to call the spirits into their human body at will and how to control them while possessed. Manshin discuss these issues as a daily routine rather than an exotic practice. In contrast, shinbyŏng patients might be reluctant to release their perceived self-control when the spirits descend. In general, there is a clear physical indication when apprentices or newly initiated practitioners become possessed during rituals. Kim Min-su was especially flamboyant in rituals performed after his initiation. He jumped up and down, swirled very fast, shook his hands above his head, and shivered strongly. Such displays of possession decrease as the practitioner becomes more experienced.

When senior performers embody one spirit after another, they usually are calm and relaxed, dancing and pivoting gracefully; even if they jump, it seems theatrical, not uncontrolled. They demonstrate knowledge of traditional performing arts through singing long mythological stories, dancing, playing musical instruments, and easily summoning the possessing spirit. Moreover, they are expected to maintain a level of control of their bodies while possessed. These abilities mark their experience and expertise and are not expected of a novice. Many

apprentices report that the more they participate in kut, the better they feel. Their uncontrollable behavior and pains diminish once they begin to learn the art of musok.

Kut performances can be frequent, even several times a week in busy times, such as before the lunar new year. Ritual frequency is also related to the popularity of the performer. In all rituals, the apprentices are expected to memorize the set-up, long songs and dances, and musical patterns. Apprentices also record the songs and take notes of the ritual actions and dance moves. When the apprentice is ready, the manshin schedules a *shin-naerim kut* (a ritual for the descending of gods), during which the initiation takes place.

“Opening the gate of words” is a term that expresses success in initiation, measured by the ability to divine the future through saying the words of the spirits. Antonetta Bruno discusses how the spirits and the manshin speak interchangeably during a performance, as if possession were intermittent (2002:148). The participants decipher who is speaking through the speaker’s linguistic choices. When a manshin speaks harshly and commandingly, it is a strong supernatural entity, and when she speaks more humbly, it is the human mediator. When a paksu talks in a high pitch, he is embodying a female spirit, but when he behaves in a brutal, masculine manner, he is possessed by a male god. The initiated practitioner is expected to gain a high level of control over possession feats. A skilled practitioner often both embodies the spirit and interprets the spirit’s words, without going in and out of trance.

It is up to the spirits to decide whether the initiation ritual is successful. In the summer of 2015, I participated in a shin-nearim kut of a manshin who already had two failed initiation rituals. She had been an apprentice for more than 10 years, and the other apprentices whispered that she could afford it only because her parents owned a furniture factory, and persevered because she became very ill after each failed ritual. That third time, she managed to open the gate of words, stand on sharp blades, and deliver divination. Her mother and sister sighed with relief when she finally stood on the knives, sweating and panting. Watching the visible relief of the shinömöni when this happened convinced me that even the mentor was not sure that initiation was possible. It all depends on the quality of the performative communication between the apprentice and the supernatural.<sup>12</sup>

Since the gods and spirits are perceived as causing the illness, and healing depends on their appeasement, apprentices are careful to be agreeable toward their momju shin and the other spirits involved in each therapeutic ritual performance. This also explains the immense effort to produce a ritual full of props, music, and expensive food and drinks.

## The Implications of Healing through Performance

Many cultures view individual and social health as interrelated. Moreover, the boundaries marking unacceptable or dangerous behaviors depend on context. Health and sickness are related to perceptions of social harmony and normativity. In Korea, musok allows some subversive behaviors to continue, legitimizing them by reframing the deviation as a socially beneficial activity resulting in supernatural blessing. Adhering to the wishes of gods and spirits is perceived as crucial for good health and success. Such a perception empowers some people who were labeled ill, transforming them through ritual performance into healers. This process assigns a liminal social role to people whose behavior marginalized them anyway, notably gay Koreans. This possibility has been anchored in religious performative contexts for decades, but now, as gender norms are gradually changing, it situates Korean vernacular performance culture within the globalized trend of tolerance toward gender flexibility and fluidity and respect for personal lifestyle choices.

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12. A documentary produced by Laurel Kendall (1991) with Diane Lee depicts a failed ritual that took place in the 1980s.



The changing cultural appreciation of sexual freedom and gender equality is creating a situation where being a female manshin or paksu is not as stigmatized as it was in the past. We can confirm this through the increased presence of musok practitioners in South Korea's screen culture as legitimate advisers on talk shows, stage performers in festivals, partners in romantic films, and objects of empathy in television dramas—even while they behave in ways that break social norms.

Healing does not necessarily change behavior considered by society as aberrant; it demonstrates how societies can cope with unique behaviors, as long as they are not harmful to others. Public performance defines sickness and healing in musok because the presence of an audience (human or supernatural) empowers the performers and affirms their social position. Thus, performance is a context that sets cultural boundaries. It defines places and entities. It presents an opportunity to announce illness and healing. It is a tool in the hands of manshin and other healers to affirm their activities as socially acceptable.

Initiation is achieved when the novice comes to know these boundaries and to perform subversive behaviors only where they are acceptable. The manshin is healed by performing the possession trance ritual, which makes the deviant behavior part of a set of acts meant to appease the spirits, and is thus socially acceptable. This approach brings together the two kinds of possession that Schlottmann (2018) lists as the most common ones discussed in anthropology: the ritualistic, central, or “positive” possession; and the spontaneous, peripheral, or “negative” one. Musok practitioners demonstrate a coexistence of the two in the same afflicted person. In that respect, the tradition of musok proves to be liberal, accepting, and flexible with regard to many gender-related issues, indeed much more so than many in contemporary Korean society. My ethnographic findings suggest that during ritual performances, reframing behaviors as spiritually beneficial rather than unhealthy can in fact heal people by removing the psychic pain of being gay in a homophobic society. Several paksu told me that their physical symptoms, such as headaches, insomnia, and general fatigue, have also disappeared after initiation. However, shinbyŏng healing has a cost: there is still a social stigma against musok.

For most Koreans, healing entails an end to symptoms (such as headaches or cancer pain), but manshin and paksu are expected to continue exhibiting cross-gender behavior as part of the veneration practice. The transformation of shinbyŏng patients into healers has benefitted many contemporary urban Koreans who have not found help in ordinary medical and psychological treatments. Traditional healing that persists in contemporary urban societies can serve as a model for more effective methods for dealing with ailments that modern medicine is unable to resolve. The power of performance is revealed throughout the process of healing in musok, which can be studied as a cultural apparatus modifying the relationship of sickness to health.

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