

Mik Ok Park and Kim Dae Rye

A Family Heritage

Interviews by Julia Varley¹

Mik Ok Park

A Daughter's Wish

The Korean State has declared your mother and father Human National Treasures. They are shamans who as well as performing the rituals in Korea, teach and present them around the world, under the name of Jindo Sikim Kut Ensemble. Jindo is the South Korean Island where this tradition comes from and Sikim Kut is the name given to this form of shamanism. The ritual consists of cleansing the soul of a recently deceased person so that it can be received in the world of the family ancestors. You are here in Europe travelling with your family and presenting this shaman ritual as one of the dancers. How did it all start for you?

Like my father, I heard and saw this shaman ceremony all the time when I was a child. But I did not actually decide to dedicate myself to it until six years ago, so I have been performing Jindo Shaman Ritual only since then. I am not really a shaman, as I have not completed my preparation. Until six years ago I was performing on the stage and I was not involved in the family Sikim tradition; still today it happens that I sing and dance with other groups.

I saw all the performances and listened to the music as a child: that is part of my experience, but it was not exactly like training. I tried to practice by myself, by humming and imitating and when I really decided to learn this tradition six years ago, it was relatively easier for me than for other students because of all the memories engraved in my mind and body.

When I was young, my father thought the shaman tradition would be too hard for me; as my brother was already

I decided to get involved again when I realised that there were not so many people who could keep this tradition alive. I felt a kind of responsibility, especially towards my mother's experience that otherwise would be lost.



1. These interviews were done during the International Symposium, *Tacit Knowledge - Heritage and Waste*, 22-27 September 1999 in Holstebro, Denmark, on the occasion of Odin Teatret's 35th anniversary.

doing music, he thought that one child involved in Sikim was enough. My father preferred me to have the possibility of living my own life, getting married and having an ordinary existence. The shamans were heavily oppressed when my parents were young, especially during the Japanese occupation of Korea that lasted from 1910 to 1945. My father remembers the troubles and sorrows and the discrimination against shamanism. He did not want to pass on that same hard life to me. For this reason I began studying late. I decided to get involved again when I realised that there were not so many people who could keep this tradition alive. I felt a kind of responsibility, especially towards my mother's experience that otherwise would be lost.

What was the first thing you learnt?

When I was fifteen years old I studied to be a Pansori singer, under the master O Jong Su. Pansori is not a shaman tradition, but it is related, it is a kind of classical solo song style that tells a story. I was lucky that my father accepted that I could do Pansori, because I was very talented with my voice. So I learnt with the master O Jong Su, until I stopped for personal reasons to start again about ten years ago.

What is the difference between Pansori and your family tradition?

The Jindo Sikim, this shaman tradition, is a lot more difficult than Pansori. I could say that Pansori is medium and the shaman ritual of the highest level of difficulty. Not everybody can do it. My father is especially strict when teaching me and I am still having problems in mastering the shaman ritual tradition. My father does not want me to perform Pansori any longer because of the lack of emotion in it, even if my mother says

it was all right to practice it. Shaman song involves much more emotion; its songs are made up of different kinds of sad solos, because it is about the dead. Pansori is more similar to storytelling. Even though there is a sad and a happy part in it, most of Pansori contains less emotion and soul.

What did you learn from Pansori?

I loved singing when I was young and I would do so all the time. I sang all the popular folk-tunes that I was fond of. Pansori is like a beautiful song for me, so I couldn't resist singing it and I also cherished all the love stories in it. It is as simple as that.

When you decided to dedicate yourself to the shaman tradition you studied with both your parents. Is what you got from your father different from what you learnt from your mother?

My father's form of teaching is more professional. When I learned from him, I had to leave aside the fact that I was his daughter. The daughter-father relationship is not part of the pedagogical association. He points out all the tunes, the variations, telling me when I am wrong and going into small detail. It was a very hard process for me. But as soon as I got to a certain level I could progress easily because of the good basics I had from my childhood and from being taught in a strict way. My father is teaching an old traditional style with modern variations and more performative elements in it, while my mother is very attached to the original form. Both of them are using very severe pedagogical tools, but the difference is in the awareness of the demands of modern performance or of the village rituals.

In the beginning I thought I learned more from my father. I was spending more time with him at home in Seoul where he is

busy teaching and I learned the authentic style from him. But as she still has many connections there, I usually went to Jindo Island with my mother and it was there that I got to know the more community-oriented shamanism. Basically it is the same ritual, but there are subtle differences in terms of tunes and tones, musical variations and texts. So now I am learning both ways.

What is the most important thing that you feel you have learned from your father?

Shaman song, which is very difficult to master. There is a lot of voice technique involved, and also spiritual technique. I learned through imitation, as it is an oral tradition. In the beginning I would repeat what my father sang. Now we sing together, but my father is always leading so that I can get used to the tunes, tonality and mood.

And what is the most important thing you have learnt from your mother?

She has a very interesting way of teaching. She does not give me any text or task to prepare beforehand for the performance, but her tactic is to give me the lyrics that I have to sing right before, so that I really have to concentrate not to ruin the performance. Even if the script is very difficult I manage the task because all my childhood memories revive and come up again. I had originally memorised the texts by repeating them together with my mother. Basically, I learn from performing together with my mother and that is the most important reference I have.

Do you practice?

Yes, I do. When I am alone, I study by myself using audio and videotapes. For example, I practice while we are travelling, in the

airports, listening to recordings. If there is a performance, I exercise with the group. Then we all get together and rehearse in the same way as a normal theatre company.

Do you coach in the same way as your parents taught you?

I will use the same pedagogical technique I learned from my parents, especially from my father. Since this is a very important tradition for me personally and for my country, I will teach in the same way. I have the firm belief that even though the younger generation is different from mine and from my parents', they must follow that path - and they are actually doing so. There are more youngsters coming to learn Jindo shaman ritual than at any time before. It is a very interesting phenomenon, but it is a reality. Most people who come to Jindo Island to learn this ritual are city people from Seoul.

In Seoul, there are three different ways of studying with my father. If you are really serious you try to get private lessons. A second way is to go to the studio, where there are workshop spaces, to attend group lessons. A third possibility is to go to the National Conservatory for Performing Arts, which has a pretty good reputation. The shaman study department there is two years old. In general I can say that most students come from the city.

What do you think would be the best way of learning?

I believe in the old way, learning through the oral tradition. It is easier to remember and the knowledge passed down in this way lasts longer.

In this unique style, the master follows the students all the time. There is no such thing as independent studies done by oneself; that is not the custom. Students

Theatre Women Generation - Mik Ok Park

should always be with the master and the process is very laborious. Students coming from far away will even live together with their teacher.

The students have to pay. Even I pay my father; if you don't you are not committed. You compensate according to how much money you have. If you are from a rich family you give more, if you are from a poor family less. Most teachers do it that way, but my father always charges the minimum to give the idea that you are paying and therefore expecting you to be good. He demands even less from students coming from Jindo Island and he even gives back the minimal charge, in the form of drink or food or something of that kind. Most students get the money from their families.

So you get money from your father to pay your father?

I am married, so I have my own money.

Do you have children?

One son, he is four years old.

Will you teach him?

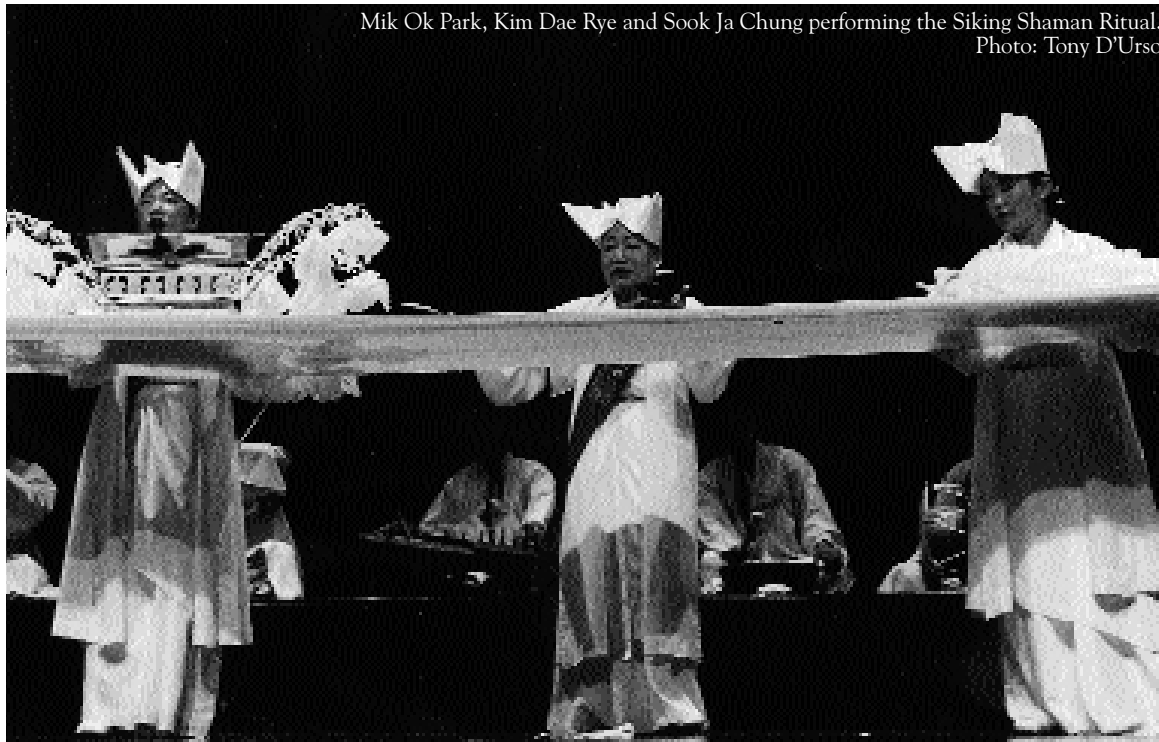
Yes, definitely. My son is already repeating songs. When I take him with me to performances, he runs around when other traditions are presented, but as soon as the Jindo tradition starts he sits and follows attentively.

If you have a daughter, will you teach her as well?

One child is enough!

Is it different for you to present the ritual as a performance or to do it within the community respecting its original spiritual function?

Once again the difference consists in the basic level of emotion. When I go to a village and we perform there, I immediately think of my own parents, of when they will pass away and I will do this kind of ritual for them. The reality of the situation automati-



cally produces a lot of emotion. If I performed ten times, ten times I would be crying. On the contrary, on stage I have always to focus on the audience response and on being precise, so the artistic level is different, as well as the emotional and spiritual engagement.

When you perform for an audience does the fact that you have to be so precise make you reach an emotional engagement that has the same kind of depth as during a ritual?

It is related to what stage you are in as a performer. I have only been performing the ritual six years. I have to still think about not making mistakes. This limits me and prevents me from being fully engaged in the performance. In the village performance it is different because there everybody is crying. It is real, so the emotions are real. But the gap between the village ritual and a presentation on stage is getting smaller and smaller as I get older and more experienced.

On stage, your father sometimes chooses particular parts of the ritual and changes the order to be more effective for the spectators. Do you agree with the choices he makes?

I agree, because the audience is important. In the village setting we don't worry about what is more effective, but in a theatre we have to be sensitive about what the spectators want and how to achieve it while presenting the shaman ritual. For most people the ritual is just a strange kind of exotic experience. We need to adjust according to the level of understanding of this performative tradition.

Does this way of thinking have a consequence for the original ritual, does the ritual keep on being the same as it was fifty years ago?

On stage, we usually follow the same order as in a village ritual. Sometimes we will cut down a little bit at the beginning and a little bit at the end and add variations in the middle part. Basically the whole way of proceeding, the whole plot and infrastructure is there, even with the changes.

I don't think the performances on stage are changing the ritual. In an original or authentic ritual - authentic not in the sense of classical ballet, but performing in a village and for nine hours - there is a lot of improvisation. Adjusting levels, bringing people in and out, drinking and eating - all these factors contribute to the ritual. In a modern theatre setting you do not have space to eat and drink together, although you do have a possibility to dance together and to improvise here and there. I could say that the modern theatre setting promotes authentic ritual. While western rituals can be done always in exactly the same way for a thousand years, our village rituals are always different. There is a very strict structure, but it is like a cloth, a shape that can change.

How do you learn to improvise?

I learned improvisation from the village ritual where people are more free and relaxed. I saw my parents just doing it, sometimes they would have a laugh, and sometimes they would be very intense. I remember those qualities and that is how I learn. Also in the performance setting I learned by seeing my parents improvise. One day my mother was sick and she couldn't do the performance and I had to take her place although I was not ready. I could not be as refined as my mother could and the improvisation would have another quality, but I still could do it.

Do women and men have the same authority in the ritual?

In the ritual setting they do have the same authority. But age consideration and a male oriented society give the responsibility of the ritual routines to the old people and mostly to the male musicians. The female performers respect the musicians who have a higher status. Nowadays it is mostly the men who are musicians and the women who are dancers.

In the matriarchal society in the old days, the women were strong and leaders of society. At that time there were both many female and male shamans. But because of Confucianism and the oppression during the Japanese occupation, men were not supposed to practice shamanism so as not to be treated as a lower class by Confucianists. Playing music has always been considered of a higher status than doing shaman ritual. That is why there are more female performers than male. So now women have a bigger responsibility in keeping the shaman tradition alive.

I feel a great responsibility and a lot of pressure. I have got to be good, to live up to my parents' name. Sometimes I feel bad because I haven't studied much, and I studied Pansori, but still the detours in my life have made me stronger. Every night is a struggle; my mother will tell me that I am not clever enough and both my parents are always hard with me. I am thirty-eight years old. I will do my best to learn from my father and my mother and I will study hard so I can be considered a disciple of what my parents have accomplished. With my parents' help, I will do my best to be close to them. My wish is that one day they can call me their daughter.

Kim Dae Rye

A Mother's Will

The Sikim shaman ritual is a family tradition. The title of shaman is passed down through generations in a hereditary fashion. What does

it mean to you that the family is so important for teaching and learning?

I am over sixty years old, but I am still investigating this very difficult tradition, the Sikim ritual. So many words and tunes have to be memorised. Even though I am now teaching my daughter, I always worry that she will not succeed in learning. I ask myself if she can really fulfil the task of mastering this tradition, because the new generation has lost the dedicated way of life. But I will do my best.

I began to learn Sikim ritual after I got married. My husband's mother told me a story of shamans and I asked her if she would teach me about it. She thought it would be too difficult for me to pick up all the music, chants and principles of the ritual. I was a traditional Pansori singer before I got married. I knew how to dance and sing, but certainly not as well as my mother-in-law. She told me about a hand written book by my husband in which all the basics were handed down. My husband started teaching me. Learning was very interesting, but memorising was also very hard work.

One day my husband's mother became very ill and she called me to her bedside. There was supposed to be a ritual wedding ceremony; it should be performed during the full moon and it was already agreed upon with the family. That was to be the first ritual I performed. I did it as I had been taught and also remembering my experience in Pansori. I remember the traditional paper and oil lamps for the ceremony. There were people dancing without music, following the rhythm given by hitting a glass bowl full of clear water with a kind of spoon. That is what we call *mu-jandan* (shaman rhythm). After that performance my mother-in-law was convinced I could become a shaman, so she helped me to learn.

The difference between Pansori and

ritual song is in the words and tuning, which are very difficult in the shaman ritual. Pansori has a set structure, but shaman song does not. I had to learn the rhythm. I trained listening to my mother-in-law's singing and then repeating after her. The people in Jindo who practice the *mu-jandan* can take ten years to learn this tradition, but I began to learn more quickly than others do. So I would perform after seeing my mother-in-law, imitating her. Now, with my husband, we can present the Sikim together as a family.

What was it like to learn from your mother-in-law?

She was a great woman and a great personality and yet very humble at the same time. I didn't have any problem with her in the learning process and I never thought her a difficult woman to communicate with. On the contrary she was a role model for me, like the strongest and most gentle mother you can imagine.

During the Sikim ritual she thought of me as a real daughter and I of her as a real mother. This helped me during my apprenticeship especially because the shaman ritual is so difficult.

What was different about your mother-in-law's teaching and your husband's?

The ritual is mainly transmitted through oral tradition. It was difficult for me in the beginning to imitate by just following my mother-in-law's teaching, so my husband helped me a lot in terms of clarifying what was missing and what I misunderstood.

Do you coach your daughter in the same way as you were taught?

Yes, I do and I should do because I have to

pass on this tradition to keep it alive. The reality of the time when I learnt is different from the one the new generation is surrounded by now. My daughter has to support her family and raise her children, so the pedagogy has to be different, but she is doing her best to continue the vitality of the shaman ritual because she believes in it. I can teach together with my husband who knows all the details of dance, voice and movement. Although we are a little bit short of time, my daughter is trying hard, so I think it will work out.

Why is the shaman ritual so important to you?

It is performance for the gods, for the spirits. If you are sad, you will express sadness in a very sincere way and if you are happy the same. This process obliges me to be truthful about my emotions and this is very important to me.

Do you feel that you manage to do that in the same way when you are doing a ritual and when you are performing in a theatre?

It is different. In the real setting of the ritual, the family is in mourning and you are in front of a corpse. Of course there is a lot of emotion involved. On stage, because of the time limit, you have to be sincere only in that restricted moment. You have to concentrate in the same way in performance as in a ritual. The precision, the quality of the song and movement, the techniques in ritual or performance, are the same, but the emotional involvement is different.

Before the performance both you and your daughter were preparing the costumes and ribbons with care, and you were ironing all the paper props. Is that something particular for the women?

Both men and women can prepare the props



Mik Ok Park and Kim Dae Rye.
Photo: Tony D'Urso

MIK OK PARK (South Korea) was born into a family of hereditary shamans. After studying and performing Pansori she decided to study her family's tradition and is now performing the rituals in South Korea and abroad.

KIM DAE RYE (South Korea) has been named National Human Treasure by the Korean state. Together with her husband Ryong Chun Park, also a Korean National Human treasure, she has founded the Jindo Sikim Kut Ensemble.

that are made of rice paper and need ironing. We get ready for the performance collaboratively, but women have sensitive hands so it does happen that they do the ironing and more delicate jobs. We also make the props together, usually five days before. For performances, we maintain the props as much as possible, while for the ritual we burn them and we have to make new ones each time. On stage we use a puppet in straw, while during the ritual the corpse and the clothes of the deceased are put on the fire.

You are also teaching Sook Ja Chung, who is forty-one years old, and has become a shaman not in the hereditary fashion, but as consequence of a divine call when she was thirty-four years old. After she was initiated, she wanted to participate in a ritual for the ancestors. She wished to perform with hereditary shamans who do rituals in a group instead of doing her own ritual alone for her spirit. So she asked to join your family as an apprentice. Are you teaching her in the same way as you teach your daughter?

It is the same process. Sook Ja Chung learns the words of the ritual, all the movements and gestures from my husband and me, and when she gets older and better she will also be able to teach her own students.

Translated from Korean by Dong Il Lee