

# When the Ancestors Call, How Do We Answer?

## Princess Bari, a Heroine's Journey

Helena Soholm, PhD

**D**uring the early part of last year, I woke up after a strange dream of the fictional film character, King Kong. I was trying to contain King Kong in a small room and stood at the doorway knowing I could not hold him in this room for very long. Moments later, I ran out of the house realizing he would be unleashed into the world to cause complete destruction. The pandemic has been like this King Kong, taking away the world we know and our collective sense of security and predictability. 2020 has been an intense year of rapid change and uncertainty. We have been grieving the loss of loved ones as well as reflecting on the things we have taken for granted before the arrival of the COVID-19 virus. The damage caused by the pandemic will leave a lasting scar, but the death of outdated patterns will force us to face

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*Helena is wearing the iconic cone hat and costume for the "Bulsa" Grandmother spirit, who is a deity associated with Buddhist practices. She is a spirit of compassion and heals the hearts of suffering people. (Photo by Jordan Nicholson)*

a novel and unknown world. Physical lockdown and restrictions on our movement offered a unique opportunity for all of us to travel inwards and sit with ourselves. The external limitations also offered an opportunity to work on healing and renew our vision for a better future. Perhaps you were one of the lucky individuals who received inspiration for a different kind of world, where kindness and compassion are priorities.

The lockdown offered a time to focus on the themes of personal and collective ancestral healing. The messages of my ancestors have been focused on building a world that honors the interconnectedness of life and to create sustainable structures for future generations. As a recent initiate of Korean shamanism, I am learning the indigenous spiritual practices of Korea. I am a first-generation immigrant from South Korea, and I grew up in a Protestant Christian household, which meant my family and I were cut off from the traditional spirituality of our ancestors. However, the power of the ancestral call cleared a path for me to step into recovering the traditional religion of my native country. I am also a psychotherapist who has been trained in Western psychological theories to assist people in healing past trauma and early life wounds. My work is situated between traditional Korean shamanism and neoshamanism as well as indigenous Korean cosmology and Western psychological perspectives.

Many people have also been listening

## All humans walking the planet today hold ancestral trauma.

for the messages of their guides but they are feeling a bit lost on how they can act towards personal and collective healing. So we ask, “When the ancestors call, how do we answer?” Let me share the different ways that the ancestors have spoken to me this year as illustrated by the Korean folktale of Princess Bari, who is considered to be the first Mudang or shaman and patron deity of all shamans. Old stories, myths, can offer fresh perspectives and guidance for troubled times.



*Gut Ceremony Altar with offerings and tools representing the deities of Korean shamanism. (Photo by Jordan Nicholson)*

### Bari, the Abandoned Princess

In a faraway kingdom under the heavens, a king and a queen are preparing for their wedding and receive counsel from an important royal advisor in the palace. The advisor tells the king and the queen not to rush their wedding since there will be great misfortune of having seven daughters and no sons if they were to get married in haste. However, the king and queen move forward with their

wedding plans and are wed soon after. Just as the advisor had foretold, the king and queen end up having

six daughters. In contemplating another child in hopes of having a son, the queen dreams of a dragon, which is an auspicious sign of a male heir. The king and queen are assured of the arrival of a son due to this dream, and the royal couple have another child, their seventh daughter. The couple cannot accept another daughter and abandons their seventh child. The princess acquires the name, “Bari Gongju,” which means “Abandoned Princess.” Shortly after, the abandoned baby is found by an elderly couple

and raised by them as their adoptive daughter.

After some time has passed, another great misfortune falls on the king and queen. They fall gravely ill and are told the only cure is a rare potion and flowers from the far western territories procured by one of their children. None of the king and queen’s six daughters are willing to travel to the far west to find the medicine their parents needed to survive. So, the royal couple had no choice but to seek out their seventh daughter, Bari, whom they abandoned at birth.

Although, her parents abandoned her, Bari does not act with resentment and anger but is happy to reunite with her family and agrees to travel to the far west to bring back the cure her parents need to survive the illness.

The Princess disguises herself as a man for safety and travels to the far western territories. On the way, she enters a dangerous underworld where she takes the time to save the suffering souls by using magical spells and a rattle. In the underworld, she encounters the guardian of the underworld who discovers she is not a man and requires Bari to marry him and give him children. During this time, Bari learns which flowers and potions can save her parents. After serving the guardian of the underworld for many years, she finally returns to her parent’s kingdom with the potion and flowers, along with her husband and children. However, upon arrival at the kingdom, she learns of the death of the king and queen. The royal funeral was already taking place. Princess Bari quickly opens the king and queen’s caskets and administers the medicine and flowers, reviving her parents from death.

After years of toil and suffering, she completes her mission of saving her parents, returning as a powerful healer. For this accomplishment and dedication, she and her family are given sacred titles in her parent's kingdom. She is considered to be the first Mudang or shaman and is worshipped as the patron goddess of shamans.<sup>1</sup>

The myth of Princess Bari is sung during Gut<sup>2</sup> ceremonies held for the deceased. In the Korean shamanic tradition, the Mudang plays the role of a medium who channels and guides the spirits that are stuck or at unrest and unable to peacefully move into the realm of the dead. The Mudang also plays the role of the priestess in offering ritualized ceremonies where she wears different costumes to possess the various deities that play specific roles in the Gut ceremony. The shaman enters trance states through dance and music.

Princess Bari is a goddess closely associated with funeral rites. While on a mission to save her own parents, she took the time to assist the souls of the dead safely transition to the underworld.<sup>3</sup> In Korean mythology, she is a significant figure for the above reasons but also due to the storyline of the heroine's path, which tackles the theme of gender and power within a highly patriarchal and Confucian society. As a woman and an abandoned daughter, she later gains a high status by her willingness to enter the feared world of the dead and bringing her parents back to life.

Princess Bari's tale follows the path of "The Hero's Journey,"<sup>4</sup> a term popularized by Joseph Campbell. According to Campbell, the mythological adventure of the hero includes the components of Separation, Initiation, and Return, which is clearly demonstrated in Bari's narrative.<sup>5</sup> Besides the obvious acts of courage and strength within this heroine's journey, the tale of Princess Bari has a special meaning in our current situation. At its root, the tale of Bari is a story of healing, where the princess steps into her power to serve in the most meaningful and compassionate way. By healing from one's personal trauma of abandonment and helping those who have caused her pain, Bari demonstrates the ultimate love of a true healer. Her life story illustrates

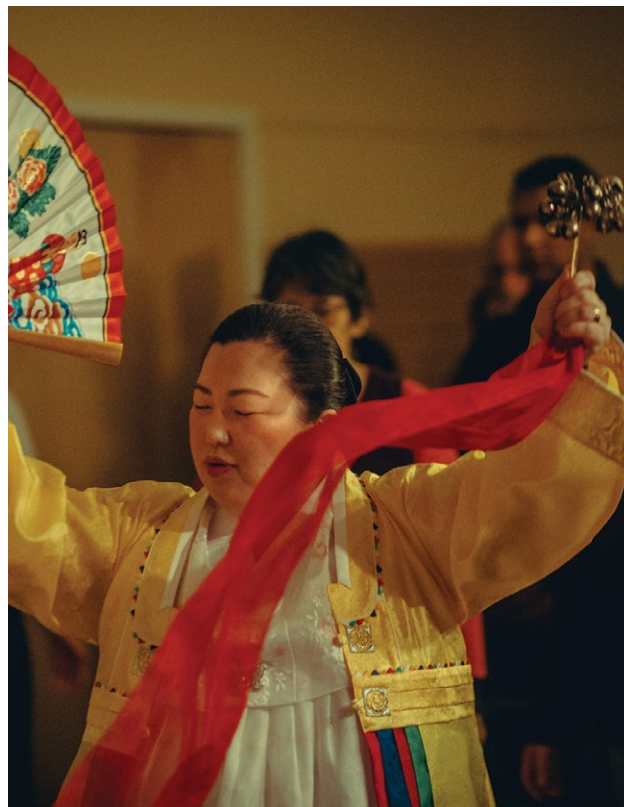
the beauty of a healing arc which begins with the focus on the individual but ends in addressing the needs of the group. In honoring her intuition and stepping fully into the heroine's path, Bari gave us a blueprint for how we can answer the call of our ancestors in a time of uncertainty and crisis.

### Ancestral and Generational Trauma

In my work as a psychotherapist and Mudang, I witness trauma as the source of most human suffering and malady. We all suffer in one way or another, and the act of healing is not just for the select few but for all of us. All humans walking the planet today hold ancestral trauma. Life has not been easy for our ancestors and they suffered physical hardship from their environment, war and political turmoil, famine and hunger, social disparities, and individual family dysfunction. Modern science has given us the tools to speak about ancestral and generational trauma seen in concepts such as epigenetics, which explains how the legacy of traumatic events can sometimes be passed down through multiple generations at the genetic level.<sup>6</sup> Ancestral trauma affects us unknowingly, causing us to react in ways that are inconsistent with our own life experiences. The devastation of the Korean War touched the lives of my immediate family members. My grandparents experienced the trauma of loss of home, livelihood, and loved ones, which negatively affected their children's sense of safety and security even if they did not directly live through the devastation of war. Without awareness, many people can be affected by their ancestral trauma, which can

compound the effects of daily stressors, leading to the mental health epidemic seen in modern societies today.

Living in technologically advanced societies, where healing and connection to self are not always prioritized, consciously working towards self-healing becomes an act of political and social resistance. With the arrival of COVID-19, many people have been forced to take the inward journey. Our culture has an abundance of tools which keep



*The yellow costume is for the ancestral grandmother spirit called, "Daeshin Halmoni." This grandmother spirit is an ancestral spirit who helps people get in touch with their own ancestors. She is often accompanied by children spirits called, "Dongja" (little boy) and "Dongyeo" (little girl). (Photo by Jordan Nicholson)*

us distracted from our soul's calling, as indigenous traditions understand it. The pandemic has made it more difficult to continue engaging in these distractions and forced us to listen to our deeper calling as our ancestors did through initiations and ceremonies.

One of the themes that emerged from my work with clients during the pandemic is fear and anxiety derived from modern living inundated with toxic messages. Daily life as it is lived in modern societies is one of distraction, disconnection, and dissociation.

- **Distraction:** We keep ourselves busy to the detriment of our health (mind and body) so that we can feel good about being productive and therefore having worth.
- **Disconnection:** Work, entertainment, and leisure activities are designed to keep us further away from our authentic selves instead of connecting us to our purpose and to others in a meaningful way.
- **Dissociation:** We engage in numbing ourselves through food, sex, alcohol, drugs, and technology to disengage from the experience of living in the moment. Mindless activities fill our days leaving us feeling empty and alone.

So, it makes sense that when many of the activities of distraction have been taken away from us that we start experiencing acute surges of anxiety and angst. This crisis is an opening and an opportunity to face our fears in order to permanently end the cycle of distraction, disconnection, and dissociation. The shifting life goals can be towards one of meaning and purpose.

Princess Bari lived a life of radical self-healing. Having suffered the generational trauma of sexism in a culture that did not value the life of a girl as much as a boy, she endured a personal trauma of being abandoned by her own parents. In modern psychological conceptualization, Princess Bari may have suffered

from attachment and self-worth issues due to the trauma of abandonment. One can also conjecture that her adoptive parents were loving enough to have provided a stable environment where she grew strong each day, preparing for her fate as Bari, the warrior shaman who saved the souls of the dead and brought healing to those who were desperately in need of her gifts. Unbeknownst to her, she followed the call of the ancestors to fulfill her destiny. So, the act of healing oneself is no longer just a luxury. It is an imperative act not only to have a good life but to ignite a movement of healing the collective human consciousness.

### **Moving from the Individual to the Collective**

Once we have achieved sufficient healing, we become aware of the “other” rather than being focused only on the self. Princess Bari beautifully demonstrates the healed soul who can act towards the collective good rather than being stuck in one’s woundedness. This is not an easy act, to care for others when one is also hurting, especially if the other is the very person who has caused one’s personal suffering. When the parents of Bari fell ill, the six older sisters who had the privilege of being raised in their biological family in the luxury of palace life, do not answer the call of awakening their souls. They choose to stay distracted, disconnected, and dissociated in a state of trauma from the generational and dysfunctional patterns of their family. However, the outsider, the one who lives in liminal space, answers that call. A true shaman holds the wisdom of awareness of trauma and pain at the collective level and acts to alleviate the suffering of others.

If Princess Bari had not spent the energy and time to heal herself, she would not have been able to answer the call of the ancestors. The healing allowed her to gain discernment in knowing that the call to help her parents was not only personal but a collective call for action. The time has come for all of us to answer the call of the ancestors even if we do not feel ready. Heroes are created during the journey. Bari likely felt feelings of resentment and anger towards her parents as well as fear of the unknown journey to the far western



*The altar is where the shamans host the spirits during the ceremony. Helena has developed her own unique style of ceremony from the traditional ceremonial practices of Korean shamanism. This altar is a small version of the grand ceremonial altars that mudang would set up to do “Gut” ceremonies. In this photo, Helena is purifying the five-colored fabric used for purification. (Photo by Jordan Nicholson)*

territories. However, the heroine is created in the act of answering the call and stepping forward even when fear is present. The wisdom lies in knowing that by answering “Yes” to the ancestors, one is also answering for all who have been entangled in the trauma of collective life on the planet. It is indeed a time for all of us to reassess if we have been too engaged in the selfishness of thinking that our healing was only for ourselves. Our personal healing journeys have been a training ground for the next level of development, attending to the other.

### Answering the Call of the Ancestors

This year, many people heard the call of the ancestors to heal themselves and to rise to the occasion of assisting our neighbors in need. To hear the call is a blessing but so many of us struggled and continue to struggle with knowing the concrete ways that we can live our purpose. In the folktale, Princess Bari had the wisdom to know what to do. As a human person, she had fears, doubts, and insecurities that could have hindered her ability to act. An important aspect of her actions is that she did not set out to gain power or status as the first shaman and become the patron deity of shamans to come. Instead, she simply answered a call to help her family. It is in the realm of relationships that Bari fulfilled her purpose. This young woman did not know how her story would end while she traveled to the far western territories and to the underworld, becoming the wife of the guardian of the underworld and raising a family, so that she could save her parents. In the darkest night of her soul, Bari maintained her conviction



From Helena's initiation, "Naerim Gut" May 2018. (Photo by Stephen Wunrow)

meaningful and purposeful lives. Sometimes, a meaningful and purposeful life is not necessarily happy or joyful on a day-to-day basis. Our society lacks the wisdom of elders. Most of my clients are intelligent, often gifted, young people who have spectacular material lives without much soul. Many are graduates of prestigious institutions and they work

to authentically enter their adult lives. Instead, these young people feel that they have followed and complied with our society's expectations only to find themselves disappointed and wanting. They are working for successful companies, making lots of money but they are not fulfilled.

During the pandemic, divine opportunity to live a fulfilled life has been offered to us. We learned that a society built on competition and greed does not ultimately serve us. No matter how comfortable it may have been before the pandemic, the soul starved behind the lure of capitalism and materialism. With the deprivation of toxic food of pre-COVID life, we can finally take in the nutrition we need to feed our souls.

So, how do we start the journey? Like Bari, we take the steps that are immediately before us. First, work diligently towards your personal healing because all endeavors within the personal healing

The great heroic journey is your life as it appears to you right now.

and completed her mission. For some of us, the pandemic has been the dark night of our soul. How can we receive divine inspiration from the story of Bari and move forward with the courage of a warrior shaman?

People seek my help as a psychotherapist and Mudang to live happier lives. But I see myself guiding people to live

at the top levels of society, but they are lost to themselves and to their purpose. I keep reminding them that if they were to have been raised in traditional or indigenous cultures, wise elders could have seen them for who they are and guided them on their path based on their soul's purpose. They would have gone through initiatory rites to give them confidence

space is never selfish. A single person working towards healing is an act of love for oneself but more importantly for the whole planet. Your healing efforts are never in vain. Healing can take place through diverse avenues of going to therapy, receiving coaching, working with indigenous healers and elders, or creating art. We live in a time where healing technologies and methods exist in abundance. One must take the initiative and take an active approach to healing.

Second, we need a community of supportive elders and friends who can guide us in realizing our gifts and purpose. The story of Bari demonstrates the princess's initiation into her calling as the first shaman, but not everybody is meant to take this path. We need people in all sectors of society to work towards building a kind and compassionate future. Again, it is in relationships that we can realize what is being asked of us. The heroic journey does not exist far away in lofty kingdoms or foreign lands. The great heroic journey is your life as it appears to you right now. What is being asked of you at this moment from those closest to you? Or, what is being dreamed within you that you are afraid to birth and manifest? Listen carefully and pay attention to the ordinary call of the ancestors to attend to your life as it stands. The call of the ancestors is not always glamorous or attractive. Bari was asked to help the very people who caused her

early life wounds. In that moment, she did not reject but she fully stepped into her calling no matter how unpleasant it was. Healing entails turning towards and transforming one's wounds as a gift for others.

Lastly, an important aspect of the tale of Bari is the central theme of feminine power. During the pandemic, the structures which have been built under colonization and patriarchy have come into question. Sociopolitical acts of oppression and subjugation of groups of people as well as the destruction of the natural environment have finally caught up to us, forcing us to face the consequences of our actions over the span of our species' existence.

With the arrival of COVID-19, we began to see the toxic ways in which we chase and energetically invest in greed and power. In the ways that the king and queen in the folktale continued to desire a son, perpetuating the patriarchal practices, our world also did not listen to the wise voice of the elders and ancestors. The queen's dream of the dragon was fulfilled but not as the queen expected. The ancestors sent a gift of life through Bari, but the king and queen refused to hear the new narrative. The royal couple was taught a critical lesson via the unconditional love of their daughter, representing the compassion seen in feminine deities such as Kuan Yin.<sup>7</sup>

A common analysis of this Korean

folktale is the demonstration of Confucian ethic of filial duty. However, at a deeper level, the story of Princess Bari is a universal tale of the hero's journey through the exaltation of feminine values in honoring the interconnectedness of life. The wise princess knew that the rejection of her own parents would become the rejection of herself. She also realized that her healing could not be complete without the acceptance of her relations.

As the ancestors call, I hope we can answer with confidence even when we are not sure of our paths because the path will become illuminated as we simply take the first step towards our great adventure.

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### Endnotes

- 1 "Abandoned Princess Bari," Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture, <https://folkency.nfm.go.kr/en/topic/detail/5353> (accessed 9 December 2020).
- 2 Traditional Korean shamanic ceremony.
- 3 "Korean Mythology," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean\\_mythology#Princess Bari](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_mythology#Princess_Bari) (accessed 9 December 2020).
- 4 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008).
- 5 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.
- 6 Natan Kellermann, "Epigenetic Transmission of Holocaust Trauma: Can Nightmares Be Inherited?" *The Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 50, no. 1 (2013): 33-39; "Genetics and Epigenetics in the Psychology Classroom," American Psychological Association, February 2019 <https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2013/02/genetics>.
- 7 Buddhist Bodhisattva or Goddess of compassion.



Photo by Jürgen Kremer