Dedication

to the brave Jeju Island women divers of yesterday, today and tomorrow

Photo by Brenda Paik Simoo
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On behalf of Jeju Sea Grant Center, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Anne Hilty for writing the first Jeju Haenyeo[Women Divers] English handbook with her selfless effort. I also send my special thanks to the Jeju Weekly for the editing and design.

As you may already know, Jeju Haenyeo culture has more than a 1000-year old history beginning from the Tamna Kingdom era and is a symbolic spirit of Jeju Island. This unique culture has not been found in other countries, and Haenyeo culture is again in the spotlight as it symbolizes independence and the power of women in the 21stcentury. This sheds new light on the Haenyeo culture, which should be conserved and reinvented as an invaluable cultural heritage.

What can we learn from the culture of Haenyeo? When healthy and independent women are given a chance to work and earn, families will flourish. And when families do well, communities will thrive and the country will prosper. This spirit is what the Jeju Haenyeo culture symbolizes, and why it should be reexamined and sustained for the sake of our society and country.

Lately, the cultural heritage of Jeju has been neglected due to the materialism dominating our society today. The step we took at a recent workshop may not be huge, but it will be a cornerstone for the reinterpretation of the Jeju Haenyeo culture which will strengthen family ties and societies by empowering women. As director of Jeju Sea Grant, it is my honor to have an opportunity to publish the first Jeju Haenyeo handbook to be written in English. Through this book, I hope that everyone will come to realize the meaning that Jeju Haenyeo culture holds for each and every one of us. The spirit and significance of the Haenyeo culture is yet to be fully implemented in our society, and this is why we must respect and study this culture thoroughly. We have to keep in mind that the culture will continue to flourish only when we preserve and value the spirit of the original culture.

This book is intended to be a guide book for studying and understanding Jeju’s female-oriented spiritual culture. In that aspect, I sincerely hope this book will aid in the UNESCO inscription of Haenyeo culture as a world intangible heritage, and becomes one of the first milestones in understanding how Jeju Haenyeo culture can shape Jeju’s historical identity. I believe that the visionary builds what dreamers imagined. We all are ambitious visionaries, and I am confident that our shared dream will come true. Thank you.

Professor Byung-Gul Lee,
Director of Jeju Sea Grant Center

As with all good projects, there are a large number of people behind the scenes, without whose knowledge, assistance, and encouragement this book would not have been possible.

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Lastly, but indeed foremost: I owe a profound and everlasting love and gratitude to the haenyeo of Jeju Island themselves, a shining example to us all. May they and their haenyeo ancestors live forever in our hearts.

Photo by Brenda Paik Sunoo
Jeju Province was designated as a Special Self-Governing Province on July 1, 2006, the first and as yet only such in the Korean Republic. That same year, the first forum for the UNESCO designation of Jeju haenyeo was held, organized by Jeju National University. Annual academic symposia were held from 2006 to 2010, the themes of which were 'Anti-Japanese Resistance, Cultural Heritage, Ocean Civilization' (2006), 'Sustainable Development; Safeguarding of Work and Heritage' (2007), 'Haenyeo and Ama [divers in Japan]: Intangible Cultural Heritage' (2008), 'UNESCO Representative List; Safeguarding Measures' (2009) and 'Issues, Prospects of Cultural Transmission' (2010). The 2009 symposium saw the participation of Professor William Logan of Deakin University (AU), International Expert for UNESCO since 1986, who spoke eloquently on the value of Jeju haenyeo.

In 2011, Jeju government formed a committee for the preservation of haenyeo culture, headed by the vice governor of economy and environment with Senator Lee Sunhwa of Jeju Provincial Council as assistant chief. At its formation, they were charged with a 5-year plan toward UNESCO designation. Senator Lee, who organized two forums that same year on the topic of haenyeo preservation and UNESCO recognition, has become a primary champion of this cause. From a long line of haenyeo, she views her efforts in relation to women’s empowerment and the elevation of haenyeo from a once-lowly position in Jeju society to one of great respect and international renown.

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In November 2013, Korean National Assembly member Gil Jungwoo called a public hearing for national support of Jeju’s endeavor. On December 20, Jeju government formally committed to a 2014 prioritization of this effort, signing a relevant MOU just four days later with the Korean National Commission for UNESCO. According to the UNESCO-established timetable, Korea’s Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA), with the support of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific (ICHAP), applied by March of 2014 toward a 2015 inscription.

The annual cycle of UNESCO inscription includes several stages over a 15-month period, for which a nation may only submit 1 application in a category. UNESCO will review a maximum of 50 applications in a cycle. In 2014, however, there were 61 applicant nations, causing UNESCO to rank them according to previously received inscriptions. This eliminated China (topping out with 37 inscriptions), Japan (second, with 22) and Korea (at third with 16); those 50 countries accepted for review all have 7 or fewer. Korea also has 26 pending applications, dating back to 2010. (Inscription of intangible cultural heritage began in 2008, and the limit of one per year was only recently imposed.) The haenyeo application, therefore, is on hold at the time of this writing, eligible for consideration once again in the following year. Application to UNESCO’s ‘Urgent Safeguarding List’, for what the organization deems ‘emergency situations (culture)’, is in consideration by Jeju officials; according to UNESCO, however, this category is reserved for heritage in ‘imminent danger of extinction’.

In addition to Jeju’s UNESCO recognitions of natural science, in the categories of Biosphere (2002), World Natural Heritage (2007), and Global Geoparks (2010), the island received intangible cultural heritage designation (2009) for the Chilmeoridang Yeongdeung-gut, a shamanist ritual to a local sea and wind goddess who protects both...
divers and fishers. Parties involved in the application process initially considered seeking status for the comprehensive haenyeo culture, ultimately deciding to begin more simply with the corresponding ritual.

UNESCO, which does not often approve entire cultural practices, requires that the practice be (1) simultaneously traditional, contemporary and living; (2) inclusive (intergenerational transmission, evolved in response to environment, contributes to a sense of identity and continuity, and also to social cohesion); (3) representative; and, (4) community-based. They must integrate such elements as skills, knowledge, cultural spaces, instruments and costumes, songs, and rituals. Examples of prior cultural designations include compagnonnage (style of apprenticeship in France), sankemon (collective fishing rite in Mali), suiti (cultural space in Latvia), daemokjang (architectural style and woodworking profession of Korea), and falconry (11 countries, including Korea).

One question looms large: What would such designation mean to Jeju haenyeo themselves? And, are they being involved in this process?

A recent cultural event organized by Senator Lee celebrated Jeju haenyeo in light of UNESCO recognition. One chief of her fishing and diving cooperative, Hong Kyung-ja of Hansu Village, has long been involved in this cause. Other haenyeo have expressed their strong desire for such international recognition. One cannot help but see the psychological benefits to women who, while long the driving force of Jeju economy, were nevertheless perceived as low-level, uneducated manual laborers who bared their bodies indiscreetly in order to go about their work.

Of greatest concern is the preservation of haenyeo culture, which has been in serious decline since the 1970s due to the advent of tourism as an economic driver coupled with greater educational and professional opportunities for women. Without renewed intergenerational transmission, the diving practice with its unique cultural features is certain to become extinct. Such recognition, however, by bringing greater esteem to the practice, may in fact attract a younger generation to the profession. It would also result in more tangible benefit such as additional funding for the support of the haenyeo community, to be used for safeguarding and other measures. UNESCO itself cites other benefits including increased visibility of cultural diversity, resource management, education, and revitalization.

Terms such as ‘eco-feminism’, ‘deep ecology’, and ‘Asian Amazons’ have been variously applied to Jeju haenyeo. At the 2012 WCC, renowned oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle identified the haenyeo as ‘indigenous marine biologists’, and ‘marine stewards’ has also been suggested. The organizational structure of divers and fishers, known locally as ‘eochongye’, has been considered a viable model of collective economics. Haenyeo practices have also been deemed ‘indigenous social enterprise’. All of these identifications are worthy of additional exploration. Above all: the most viable and sustainable form of cultural preservation is that which renders traditional practice relevant to the modern era. UNESCO status may well contribute to this quest.

Jeju Island, South Korea, is home to the world’s famed free- or breathhold-diving women. Many may know of the ‘pearl divers’ or ‘ama’ of Japan; recently, however, it is Jeju’s ‘haenyeo’ that have been gaining worldwide recognition.

But who are they, really? How do we separate fact from fiction?

Read 10 international newspaper accounts, and you’ll get 11 versions of the story. Watch films and videos made about these women, and you’ll witness an equal bouillabaisse of the details that are meant to describe them. Are they really so mysterious?

Remarkable -- without a doubt. Unique -- yes, in their own way, and surely in regard to their greater cultural milieu, including both a tradition of shamanism stretching back thousands of years and a system of collective economies that remains relevant today.

But they are not superhuman -- though their prowess, professional skills, and knowledge of the marine ecosystem may indicate otherwise.

Many of today’s haenyeo are indeed grannies of the sea, with very few under the age of 50 and a large percentage in their 70s and beyond. After centuries of this practice, intergenerational transmission has now ceased and the remaining 4,500 divers are aging.

Numerous preservation efforts have been initiated, but the young women seek higher education and corresponding employment at their diving mothers’ encouragement, and it is possible that the time is soon coming for this noble profession to be gently laid to its rest.

These women, and their countless matriarchal ancestors, deserve to be honored and memorialized -- and, perhaps in some new, 21st century form, for their work to continue.

Come -- meet these sea women, the Jeju haenyeo. Once you have, you will never forget them.
I. Haenyeo Profession

Jeju haenyeo are free-divers with a centuries-old tradition of mining the seabed for marine products. They have never used any supplemental breathing equipment, unlike some other diving societies, and have built an elaborate set of cultural practices around their profession. While early records are sparse and there is little to indicate men's role in this work, for the past few centuries at least, it has been solely the work of women.
There is much speculation regarding the origin of the diving women's profession. Early evidence exists in royal documents of the shellfish tributes paid to the king by Jeju people, reaching as far back as 503 AD in the Samguk Sagi of King Munja and again in several instances during the Goryeo era (918-1392). Though there is much earlier archaeological evidence of shellfish harvesting found in the 300 BC Sangmo Village shell mounds, it is unknowable whether they were gathered by diving or other shallow water gathering methods.

During the Joseon era (1392-1910) it is recorded in a 1460 document of the court-appointed island governor that he refused to eat abalone during his term, out of pity for the hardship of the divers. Several documents of this era identify male offshore abalone divers called 'pojak', including the ‘Namsarok’ of 1601 and ‘Tamnaji’, a record of Governor Yi Won-jin (1651-53). (The island was an independent kingdom known as Tamna until subsumed by Korea in 1404, and which retained the name and a fair amount of sovereignty through the Joseon era.) It is not until 1629 in the Jeju Pungtogi that scholar Geon Lee mentions the ‘indecency’ (based on their minimal clothing) of the ‘jamnyeo’ (women divers). The Jiyeongnok, a document of Governor Yi Ik-tae (1651-53), (The island was an independent kingdom known as Tamna until subsumed by Korea in 1404, and which retained the name and a fair amount of sovereignty through the Joseon era.)

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One might well think that this has always been ‘women’s work’ as in many marine communities, following an age-old division of labor in which fishing represents the ‘hunting’ and diving the ‘gathering’ of pre-agrarian societies. It is also often said that women have a higher body fat content as well as shiver index which render them better suited to the diving work, though this is not definitive. It is further proposed that the royal tribute was increasingly punitive during the Joseon era, and that women took up the diving work exclusively during that time as their wages were not subject to taxation. None of this, however, is conclusive, though it is certain that by the...
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Photo by Sung-Eun Lee.

Historical Overview

I. Haenyeo Profession

The haenyeo, their work long disparaged as lowly, uneducated, dangerous, and perhaps irrelevant in these modern times, and with their numbers in continued decline, have enjoyed an increasing surge in public interest (if not actual recruitment) since the 1980s, now at an all-time high. While local people still do not want their own family members to join the profession, nevertheless the greater community now heralds their work and their place in the history of this island. External interest can also be seen, which has undoubtedly served to further increase their value in the minds of both the island and mainland populace. There is also alarm over the decline in numbers, aging population, and imminent loss of this iconic profession, with corresponding preservation efforts.

Photo by Sung-Eun Lee.

Jeju Haenyeo: Stewards of the Sea

In the Joseon era, divers had to pay an exceedingly heavy royal tribute and were in the lowest class akin to that of slaves, their male family members forbidden to enter the educational (‘hyangkyo’) or civil service system. This began to change in the Colonial era when, under the Japanese, their work was professionalized and absorbed into the Japanese industrial system. Though divers remained marginalized at one of the lowest social strata, the Japanese overlords had abolished Korea’s long-held class system; as many Jeju males emigrated to Japan for factory work and the island saw a shortage in male population, it was the haenyeo profession that became the driving economic force. Their work, based on export primarily to Japan, was lucrative if not prestigious, and divers even earned more than their migrant factory-worker husbands.

Following the Colonial era which ended with the Allied victory of the Pacific War (aka, the Pacific Ocean Theater of World War II), as a result of which Japan was required to abandon all areas of occupation including Korea, there was a transitional period (1945 to late 1960s) that included an interim government and first attempt at nationhood, as well as a time of military routing and execution of so-called communists and their sympathizers (1947-54) which contained Korea’s civil war (1950-53) and resulted in a partitioning of the country. During this time of turmoil, the divers focused especially on migrant work which had become very lucrative; many additional women took up the profession who had not done so previously, swelling the total number of divers as a result. They were free to dive anywhere on the Korean mainland until 1962, at which time trade between Korea and Japan resumed and coastal areas throughout Korea became much more regulated.

From the late 1960s Korea entered its second Industrial era (the first coinciding with that of the Colonial era as overseen by Japan).

This era saw the transformation of Jeju haenyeo and the transition of their profession from one driven by merchants as transactional agents and divers as wage laborers into one of simple commodity production overseen by the fishing cooperatives themselves; brown algae, prized by Japan, became a major commodity. The number of divers reached their peak, according to government documentation, at 24,268 in 1966. Registration of divers sharply decreased over the following decade to only 8,402 in 1975, and has steadily declined since that time; today there are only 4,557 divers who are registered and actively working, with another 5,380 recorded as being in retirement.

There are many reasons for this decline, which will be later addressed. It may be said, however, that intergenerational transmission has effectively ceased since the 1960s and 70s, remaining divers are aging out of professional work, and others who were once registered have left for other professions, notably small business ownership.

One of the most notable characteristics in the history of this labor method is the transition from a tributary and subsistence-based orientation, which lasted from the origination of this free-diving collection practice through the Joseon era, to an early form of market capitalism as of the Colonial era, specifically one of simple commodity production from the 1960s to the present day. This shift also indicates a movement from simple means of livelihood to one of profession, while continuing to follow a gender-based division of labor.

The ‘Saemaul Undong’ or New Community program of post-war reconstruction and economic development, initiated in 1970 by then-president Chung-hee Park, emphasized nationalism and a resurgence of earlier patriarchal and conservative values as well as a rejection of tradition and embracing of modernity. Professions rooted in tradition such as that of the divers spiraled into decline or more abrupt cessation as a result. This endeavor, while heralded for its swift rebuilding of Korea’s economic foundation, lost popularity by the latter part of that decade, and interest in traditions as a form of cultural identity was renewed with the advent of the ‘Minjung’ or People’s Movement.

In this Industrial era, Jeju Island turned to tourism as an increasingly primary aspect of economic development. Initiated in 1970, the tourism-based economy surpassed agro-marine industries by 1978, and by 1990, 62% of the island economy was tourism-generated.

The haenyeo, their work long disparaged as lowly, uneducated, dangerous, and perhaps irrelevant in these modern times, and with their numbers in continued decline, have enjoyed an increasing surge in public interest (if not actual recruitment) since the 1980s, now at an all-time high. While local people still do not want their own family members to join the profession, nevertheless the greater community now heralds their work and their place in the history of this island. External interest can also be seen, which has undoubtedly served to further increase their value in the minds of both the island and mainland populace. There is also alarm over the decline in numbers, aging population, and imminent loss of this iconic profession, with corresponding preservation efforts.
Voice of the Haenyeo

Hansu Village

Kyung-ja Hong (65)
Chief of fishing collective

We go to the Otherworld ['jeoseung'] to earn money, and return to the earthly world ['iseung'] to save our kids. This is a haenyeo proverb. When I’m in the sea and the weather is bad, the water unclear, I often wonder: why am I doing this? But when it’s a good day and the catch is in sight, my mind is completely empty except for my goal. And when I emerge from the water, all of my worries and cares have somehow disappeared.

“But the sea is turning white. There is no more seaweed left. The marine life is much less than it was in my youth. When a typhoon damages the farmers’ crops, they are compensated by the government, but we are not compensated for the destruction of the sea by climate change—because the damage is invisible to those who do not enter the water. Government officials should get out of their offices and come down to the sea – to see for themselves the damages brought on by pollution and climate change.

“We are a community. We fight at times, yet we are like a family. Among ourselves, it’s simply ‘eonni’ [sister] or ‘samchun’ [lit. ‘uncle’ but used generically for one’s elder]. We hold our breath, go into cold water, and raise our kids...and we are brave, and we survive.”

Excerpted from “Portrait of a diving woman” by this author, published in Jeju Weekly on 8/14/2011.

“We go to the Otherworld to earn money, and return to the earthly world to save our kids.”
Migrant Diving Work

There are two features of particular note in the history of the women divers, both having to do with the Colonial era and including the period leading up to same. (Japan-Korea treaties were signed in 1876 and 1905, the latter of which rendered Korea a protectorate of Japan.) The first is the notion of ‘chulga-muljil’ or migrant diving work (also called ‘bakkat-muljil’) that began in 1895 at an island off the southeastern Korean coast near Busan and ultimately included seasonal work in the waters of Korea mainland, Japan, China, and the easternmost coast of Russia.

The migrant work of the divers was one of the key features that moved what was once mere subsistence and tributary into a professional status. By leaving their homes for work elsewhere, the divers took on a professional identity; they worked for merchants, first Japanese and later Korean, as wage laborers. During the 1930s, approximately 2/3 of the migrant divers went to the Korean mainland, while the remaining 1/3 went to Japan; at its peak, the migrant work represented more than 50% of all divers. [See Table 1.] Jejudo Haenyeo Fisheries Cooperative, established in 1920 and following Japanese regulations and policies, managed all migrant work with 5 branch offices: at 4 commercial ports on Jeju Island (Moseulpo, Hallim, Gimnyeong and Seongsan), and one in the southeastern Korea mainland (Busan), as well as one in Japan for ease of import (Tsushima). Officially, only members of this collective were permitted to engage in migratory work of the Korea mainland, so in consideration of the lucrative nature of such work, membership was in record numbers.

Japanese female divers, known as ‘ama’, also migrated to the southeastern Korean peninsula starting in 1883. They were unacclimatized to the colder waters, however, which restricted their diving periods. The merchants were also reluctant to hire them as wage laborers because their method of using a single small boat plus boatman per diver (typically, married couples worked together) were more costly than that of Jeju divers who used one boat per group. Ultimately, they had all returned to Japan by 1929.

Migrant work ceased by 1970. By that time, local women had learned the skill and were also diving. As a result, local fisheries cooperatives in the mainland were able to reserve exclusive diving rights for their own members, or place limitations on migrant divers including a registration fee and limited number of nonmember registrations for seasonal work. Some Jeju divers settled in the new areas, while the majority returned to Jeju for good.
The second feature is the divers’ resistance movement against the Japanese occupiers. While they are often sentimentalized as ‘freedom fighters’, in fact the protests began as a result of unfair labor practices; the divers felt the Japanese were not giving them fair price for their products, taking too high a percentage for themselves. In 1930 a corrupt officer of the Jejudo Haenyeo Fisheries Cooperative was arranging illegal sale of agar to the Japanese via Seongsan port; in 1931, the cooperative gave an exclusive contract to a Japanese company at a 40% discount off the market price, which forced the divers to sell their products to the cooperative for even less.

When divers protested, the cooperative and local government promised to correct the situation but did nothing for months, prompting a group of divers from Hado Village to organize demonstrations. Joined by divers from surrounding communities, they initially developed a document on December 20, 1931, outlining their terms. On January 7, 1932, hundreds of divers held a protest march from Hado to Sehwa Village on market day, when the most people would be gathered; there, they held a meeting to denounce the cooperative, then marched further to Pyeongdae Village and the district office to deliver the document with their demands.

Over the course of 1931-2, there were more than 230 resistance meetings, 9 demonstrations with more than 4000 demonstrators in total, and the involvement of approximately 17,000 people. Though the new governor finally agreed to some of the divers’ demands, nevertheless 34 divers as well as a dozen supporters were arrested and jailed. As the haenyeo leaders were graduates of the Hado Night School [for divers] run by members of Hyeoku Alliance, considered a socialist activist organization, the movement was eventually considered to be the earliest protest against Japanese colonization and pro-independence.
“My aunt used to say, ‘a haenyeo leaves her life behind when going to the sea’, meaning that it is dangerous, possibly even leading to death. But I believe my destiny lies in the sea. Every time I dive and go underwater, I feel this is my ‘calling’. We hold our breath for a long time, searching for something to catch, and the joy and triumph that come after finding a little abalone or a shell cannot be described in words.

“We do compete, but at the same time, we protect each other and the sea, trying to live in harmony. We do not blindly sweep everything for money. For example, during spawning seasons, we ban ourselves from catching any marine product.

“Haenyeo are very strong yet beautiful ladies who know how to live in harmony with nature and others. I wish to pass down this tradition to future generations and, hopefully, restore the precious values my hometown Mara had.”

Excerpted from “Youngest haenyeo preserves Korean women’s culture at seashore” by Bo-ra Moon, published in Ewha Voice on 4/12/2013.
Jeju divers are highly skilled and require a great degree of physical fitness, especially in their prime. Part athlete, part artisan, they are well-known for diving on average up to 20m and holding their breath for up to 2 minutes at a time; the most highly skilled surpass these figures and the lower-skilled dive more shallowly. While this does not compare to the athletic free-divers of the world, or indeed even to a marine culture such as the Bajau of the Indo-Malay region, it is nonetheless impressive to the majority of us. This is due not to any extraordinary features of Jeju women genetically, but to the divers' early adaptation and frequent practice over many years, resulting in an enhanced cardiopulmonary capacity as well as swimming ability. They also must have an affinity for the sea, to most a 'second home' often thought more familiar than that on land. Naturally, they are strong swimmers as well. They must develop skills for determining their location in the water in relation to other objects such as their net or the boat, and how to gauge their distance from the surface relative to their increasing need for oxygen. Their bodies also develop cold tolerance and a higher shiver index than the average person.

When diving, they not only dive for harvest; far more often, they are diving to assess the seabed for prey, gauge underwater conditions, and adapt their bodies to the underwater climate and pressure by repeated shallow dives preceding any deeper ones. These no-yield dives are called ‘heod-sun’ or ‘heod-muljil’.

Additionally, the divers develop various skills in using their hand tools for harvest; for example, the 'bitchang' or prying tool for removing abalone from their perch must be swiftly inserted and sliced in such a way as to loosen the abalone in one quick movement, before it has a chance to grip down around the tool, in effect trapping the tool between itself and rock -- and the diver with it, as the tool is attached to her wrist. The divers naturally watch out for one another underwater, so that if one gets into any difficulty, others will immediately come to her aid. Nevertheless, accidents do happen, and divers do die underwater as a result, so they remain vigilant and continuously perfect their skills.

Divers are classified according to skill levels: ‘sang-gun’ (highest), ‘jung-gun’ (middle), and ‘ha-gun’ (lowest); this generally determines where they can dive, and in what weather conditions. It is generally believed that the more a diver practices her skill, the better she will become, unless impaired; the category of ha-gun, thus, generally includes the novice (‘seg-jamsu’ or baby diver), rising skill / young (‘jogeun-jamsu’, small diver), and the elderly (‘halmang-jamsu’ or grandmother diver). Going out by boat is typically reserved for sang-gun, swimming out from shore for jung-gun, and diving near the shoreline for ha-gun. In reality, however, though the 3 tiers exist, in everyday life the divers primarily refer to their position as either high (sang-gun) or low (ha-gun) and the category of jung-gun for mid-level diving skills is seldom used. In the divers' organically democratic system of decision-making, however, these 3 classes are very much in evidence, with sang-gun taking the lead, jung-gun -- surely the largest group -- following suit, and ha-gun taking a very secondary role. Sang-gun are also given seats of privilege and other gestures of respect. While all members have voting privileges and decisions are based on consensus, opinions are weighted and even the speaking order is determined by this 3-tier system.

The work of the haenyeo, locally termed ‘muljil’ (water work), can be further delineated as ‘got-muljil’ or work from the shore and ‘baet-muljil’ or that from a boat. This in turn corresponds with the earlier introduced terms of ‘chulga-muljil’ / ‘bakkat-muljil’ or work abroad, which conceptually includes the Korean mainland as well as other countries. The terms are all-encompassing, used to describe the complete process of collection.

Divers refer to mul-jil as a competition with oneself, in terms of breath control and other skills necessary not only for good harvest but safety as well. Mentally, they must control their minds against greed for self-preservation, and adopt vigilance in regard to the continuous changes and irregularities of the sea. They maintain a map of the seabed in their minds, and an almost visceral knowledge of the marine environment.
Learning Methods

Traditionally, very young children of both genders in coastal villages spent a good deal of their time playing in the sea, including learning to swim and dive. By the time a girl was around 7-8 years of age, as her male counterparts went off to fish with the men, she was expected to take this ‘play’ more seriously, by practicing her diving skills in order to gather shellfish in the shallow waters. By age 10 she was given her first flotation device called ‘tewak’ and around 15-18 she could enter deeper water and socially began to be identified as a diver. She was expected to graduate from shoreline diving to deeper waters and finally, from a boat. Though she could certainly receive some manner of instruction from her mother, there was no formal system for learning, only observation and mimicry, trial-and-error, repeated practice, adaptation to changing conditions, and picking up information organically in the company of divers. At a point when ready, she would be required to formally join the divers’ association known as ‘jamsu-hoi’.

The ‘bulteok’, a seaside firepit surrounded by low stone walls, provided a place whereby such information could be learned. Used for changing clothes, warming one’s body after diving, and discussing all manner of business, it was the latter which could provide solid education for sharp ears. Divers would discuss the sea and weather conditions, where to locate certain catch, and how to improve one’s skills, as they recapped the day’s events at sea, and the young girl, by silently and carefully listening and then applying what she heard to her own diving, could receive a thorough yet ‘accidental’ education in the profession.

Today there is a haenyeo summer school program in its 6th year, and a second one scheduled to open in 2015. While these are government-sponsored preservation projects, to raise awareness of haenyeo skills and possibly increase the number of haenyeo, the majority of learners have no intention of entering the profession -- or at best, wish to do it part-time. The learning process in this setting, with haenyeo as teachers, is largely the same as it has been historically: watch, do, learn.

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Repeated diving brings multiple symptoms. The syndrome known as “jamsu-byeong” (diving sickness) is common among Jeju haenyeo and includes not only chronic headache but also digestive problems, joint pain, and tinnitus. The haenyeo typically take a headache remedy, traditionally a seaside herb known locally as ‘sumbegi’, prior to diving, likely an anticoagulant and/or blood vessel dilator; chronic use increases the risk for both cerebrovascular accident (‘stroke’) and aneurysm, thought to be a primary cause of haenyeo drownings. Jeju government now sponsors hyperbaric oxygen therapy for haenyeo, in which pure oxygen is administered within a sealed chamber that also simulates the pressure change of diving. Ironically, if taken in excess this treatment can cause oxygen toxicity, resulting in central nervous and pulmonary symptoms.

‘Shallow water blackout’ poses another threat, in which the diver loses consciousness due to cerebral hypoxia because of a malfunction in the brain stem’s normal signaling of the need for respiration. This can result from the practice, common among haenyeo, of taking repeated deep breaths before diving in order to extend breath-hold capacity -- a form of hyperventilation that lowers the body’s carbon dioxide level which otherwise signals the need for oxygen. The diver’s unconscious state causes her to swallow water and asphyxiate, resulting in a ‘quiet drowning’.

Jeju haenyeo traditionally dove without thermal gear regardless of water temperature, risking hypothermia with symptoms of muscle cramping, loss of strength and decreased consciousness. Wetsuits were introduced in the 1970s; the tradeoff, however, is that haenyeo must now wear a belt of lead weights to combat the suit’s buoyancy, which contributes to chronic lumbar and hip pain and degeneration. Other challenges to Jeju haenyeo include barotrauma or damage to various bodily tissues due to repeated pressure changes; lacerations and abrasions; and, venomous stinging or biting by sea creatures.

Excerpted from "The Science of Haenyeo" by this author, published in Jeju Weekly on 11/20/2012.
A number of tools are utilized by the Jeju diving women, falling into 3 primary categories: hand tools, collection equipment, and divewear. (Technically, the boat that takes the most highly skilled divers out to deeper waters could also be considered a tool, or equipment.) Hand tools for harvesting include the ‘bitchang,’ or flat prying tool akin to a heavy dull knife blade or chisel, for lifting abalone from rock; the ‘jonggae-homi’ or small sickle for cutting seaweed; the ‘seongge-kal’ or broad-bladed knife for removing sea urchins; the ‘gol-gaengi’, a small hoe for pulling creatures from crevices in a reef, turning over small rocks in search of shellfish, and moving oneself slowly along the reef by pulling on its crags for propulsion; the ‘homaengi’ or ‘kkakkuri’, a long hook; and the ‘jaksal’ or spear. The latter two, for catching cephalopods and fish, respectively, rather than gathering shellfish or seaweed, are not in regular use today; the gol-gaengi is the most multi-purpose tool. The net for containing one’s harvest, in various sizes, is a ‘mangari’ or ‘mangsari’ (often with the prefix ‘hong’), which is attached to a buoy the size of a soccer ball, historically made from a hollowed gourd but today of styrofoam, called a ‘tewak’. Together, they are ‘tewak-mangsari’ and are not only used for collection but, in regard to the buoy, as a support for a weary haenyeo. The diver also clings to it when swimming far from shore, using only her fins for propulsion rather than swimming fully, in order to reserve her strength for the diving work.

The divewear represents one of the more dramatic changes in the history of the diving women. Historically, divers wore a simple cotton swimming costume called ‘mul-ot’ (literally, water-clothes), of minimal coverage which provided little comfort in the cold water and severely inhibited winter diving. The suit or ‘mul-ot’ consisted of 3 pieces: ‘mul-jeoksam’ (water-jacket), ‘mul-sojungi’ (water-panties), and ‘mul-sugeon’ (water-headscarf). It was typically constructed from white cotton as white made the divers more visible underwater and was thought to deflect sharks and dolphins; the shorts were alternately black in certain periods, and black was also worn by menstruating divers for practical reasons. The costume was form-fitting to aid in diving and swimming, and the top was typically not worn in warmer months.

In the 1970s, however, as some divers had adopted wetsuits that they received from family members in Japan, and which then gave them an unfair advantage over others, Jeju government began providing rubber 3-piece wetsuits (with a jacket, pants, and cap, now increasingly made of neoprene) for the divers, called ‘gomu-ot’ (rubber clothes) or simply ‘jamsu-bok’ (dive suit). Officially, this was in order to contribute to their health and to allow them to dive longer and for more of the year; the wetsuit not only increases their cold tolerance but also protects them from jellyfish stings, poisonous water snakes, and other dangerous sea creatures. Unofficially, perhaps, this change was also to render their appearance more ‘acceptable’ as tourism, primarily domestic (from the mainland), was on the rise. The cotton costume, noted by royal emissaries in the 17th century as ‘immodest’, was a source of contention on Jeju, further dividing coastal from mid-mountain communities. At the same time the divers adopted swim fins, and the face mask (‘keun-nun’ or ‘wang-nun’, big eye) replaced the goggles of old (‘jogeun-nun’ or ‘jokse-nun’, small eyes), all of which increased their capability. The downside to this: due to the suit’s buoyancy, they now had to wear weight belts, called ‘yeoncheol’ (lead) or ‘bongdol’ (sinker), in
order to reach the ocean floor, which have in turn contributed to the development of lumbar and hip symptoms, new health concerns. Ironically, as a diver ages she needs to add more weights as she has less physical strength to reach the seabed on her own, thus creating more strain on aging and therefore increasingly fragile bones and joints.

The ‘sumbisori’ or high-pitched whistle emitted by haenyeo as they surface is perhaps one of their most iconic features. A sharp, forceful expulsion of carbon dioxide from their lungs, followed by a quick intake of fresh oxygen, results in this sound often described as both lilting and haunting. This bird-like cry, coupled with their shiny black wetsuits and graceful water movements, makes them seem ever more akin to the black cormorants or diving birds, ubiquitously perched on nearby black volcanic rocks in the sea.

The ‘sumbisori’

or high-pitched whistle emitted by haenyeo as they surface is perhaps one of their most iconic features.
The eochongye acts as the business structure, while the jamsuhoi functions somewhat like a modern-day union.

somewhat like a modern-day union, protecting the rights and enforcing the responsibilities of its members as well as seeing to their safety and economic well-being. The eochongye and jamsuhoi are thereby interdependent.

As each of the coastal villages is largely self-governing, the functions of these organizing bodies can vary. According to Jeju provincial government, there are currently 100 eochongye, down from 127 in 2006. A female (diver) was elected as head of an eochongye for the first time in 1997; today, fewer than 20 of the 100 collectives are led by women.

Revenue of the divers, divided according to productivity, customarily follows the 3-level skill structure of sang-gun (highest) to ha-gun (lowest).

Common-pool resource methods such as eochongye and jamsuhoi are known to be less costly and more efficient for resource management, to minimize exploitation / overfishing as grounds are not open to the public, to be more highly incentive, and to make use of local knowledge regarding resource conditions, with minimal perceived external threat or pressure. Jeju provincial government, however, sees problems: no concept of public space [a conflict most notably, with tourism]; competitive fishing [among the various eochongye], with no overarching management system; and, a focus on market-driven profit that is not concerned with long-term resource management.

Among the divers themselves, opinions are divided; one diver, president of her jamsuhoi, observed that the sea, with its increasing depletion of marine product due in part to climate change but also to overfishing, "...will recover only when haenyeo finally stop diving," while another lamented, "how will the sea be managed if haenyeo are no more?"

The diving women have a shared system of profit typically known as common-pool resource, common property-based method, or cooperative economics. This system, by ‘eochongye’ or fishing village collective which also governs fishermen, was formally established in 1962 under the Fisheries Cooperative Act, though the first such cooperative was established in 1916 in Guza township. Previously, the divers were regulated only by the Fisheries Act of Korea (1952) as determined by their own association, known as ‘jamsuhoi’ or ‘haenyeohoi’ (and in some villages, simply ‘buinhoi’ -- women’s society). The jamsuhoi falls under the jurisdiction of the eochongye. The eochongye acts as the business structure, while the jamsuhoi functions

Fishing Collective

Out to the deeper waters. Photo by Brenda Piek Sunoo.

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Doo-kyo Kang (79)

“I’m no good at all [at the profession], but I’m a haenyeo. I can’t be top class. I’m low class! When we were young, we always liked to spend hot days playing in the sea. Swimming and splashing, that was our play. That’s how we learn [the diving skills]. But when playing, ears could go wrong. Since then my ears hurt underwater. ‘Haenyeo usually take diving medicine. Without it, diving is too painful, with dizziness, nausea and vomiting. But since I am not diving deep, I started diving without medicine. I believed there was still something left to catch, without taking it. But even so, my head aches even in low water.

“I don’t go deep. It’s dangerous for those diving deep. It would be scary to die underwater... We pray to the dragon king of the sea for abundant harvest, and pray for safe return without accident. We pray and pray.

“I love it. Catching seafood is a lot of fun. I can’t fish as much as a top-class, but it satisfies me. I would never stop having fun with the diving work. I will continue on as long as I can, maybe to age 85.”

Excerpted from “Grandma Ocean,” a film short by Hui-jin Kang shown at the 2013 Jeju Women’s Film Festival.
I. Haenyeo Profession

The Fisheries Act of Korea established coastal waters as village fishing territory, from the shoreline outward to an average 7-meter depth at the lowest ebb tide. These areas are not open to the public for fishing or harvest, as eochongye members have exclusive rights. This represents 14,431 hectares of fishing grounds. Registered active divers presently number 4,507, rendering their area use per capita at 3.15 hectares, with 2,582 divers are in the Jeju City jurisdiction, 1,925 in the jurisdiction of Seogwipo City. Another 5,380 are in retirement.

Traditionally, a jamsuhoi will designate certain regions of their village sea for a specific purpose. There is the grandma sea ('halmang-badang') which is a shallow area near the shore; more skilled divers are forbidden from diving there, in order to leave the marine products for the elderly haenyeo where it is easy for them to reach. The ‘aegi-badang’ or baby-sea is reserved for young girls learning to dive. Another such is the school sea ('hakkyo-badang') from which all proceeds are pooled for school construction or repair. In today’s era of public funding for same, this is no longer necessary, but does represent the self-governing responsibility of villages historically.

Other purposes may be to contribute to the annual shamanist rites for the village, help a diver with a family crisis, or contribute to the care of the elderly haenyeo, thereby depicting the historic mutual aid structure on which the villages were built.

Currently, haenyeo are able to apply for a license after 60 days of diving in a village. The license is not open to everyone, however; it is only for a woman who was born and currently lives in the village, or who moved in after marrying a man who is a native village resident. If a woman leaves the village to marry or otherwise move elsewhere, she forfeits her right to dive in that village.

The period in which she can dive following her move, however, or when she can begin as a newcomer, varies from one village to the next. Following the 1962 Fisheries Cooperative Act, licensure was implemented and also limited to one diver per household.

Haenyeo currently dive an average of 4-6 hours a day (less in winter), 15 days per month, and 11 months a year (avoiding a month of spawning). The monthly hours of diving increased from 38 in the 1960s to 75 in the 1980s, largely due to the advent of wetsuits.

They are generally forbidden from diving alone, not only for issues of safety but also to ensure that the rules are maintained. This is especially true during the brief seasons for sea urchins and certain seaweeds, which are highly regulated. They are also required to attend the monthly sea cleaning days, or pay a penalty.

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II. Haenyeo Decline and Preservation

The number of registered divers has been in a steep decline for the past several decades, now rendering this a population that is aging out. Recognizing this phenomenon and the value of this unique traditional community, local government and civic organizations have implemented a number of preservation efforts.
There are presently 4,507 active divers registered, with another 5,380 in retirement; this figure represents a steady decline in the diver population since the late 1960s. [See Table 2.] As young women have stopped entering the profession for at least two generations (since the late 1960s), 98% are over the age of 70; more than 50% are over the age of 70, and less than 1% under the age of 30. [See Table 3.] As further indication of the aging and decline of the diver population, in the 1960s a diver’s peak was considered to be between the ages of 25-35, and she was an elder at 45 (also correlated to an average life expectancy of 52.4 years at that time); the final category of government statistical tables was ‘over the age of 70’.

Annual fishery gross income is currently at 7,435 metric tons (mt) for a revenue of 23.7 billion won. In comparison, the yield in 1995 was 17,521 mt at a value of 37,679 bn won; in 2000, it was 8,763 mt at 20,392 bn won; and in 2013, 4,368 mt at 22,546 bn won, with fluctuations in the types of products harvested, steady decline in number of divers, and increase in aquaculture (fish farms). [See Table 4.]

Product type has varied over time due to marine environment changes. Major products harvested at present include turbinidae or turban snails (locally: ‘sora’), sea urchin (‘seong-ge’), gelidium algae, for making agar (‘u-moot-gasari’), sea cucumber (‘hae-sam’ -- ‘sea ginseng’), and abalone (‘jeon-bok’); hizikia and undaria seaweeds are also gathered. Sea urchin and abalone have especially short harvesting periods, while the harvest of gelidium is also seasonally limited.

Table 2. Registered Haenyeo (active)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Yield (ton)</th>
<th>Value (million KRW)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>23,081</td>
<td>5,886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>14,143</td>
<td>5,789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>8,402</td>
<td>5,545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>7,649</td>
<td>4,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>7,804</td>
<td>4,507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>6,827</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jeju Provincial Government

Table 3. Current Age Groups of Registered Haenyeo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>50-59</th>
<th>60-69</th>
<th>70</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 30</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>696 (15.4)</td>
<td>1,448 (32.1)</td>
<td>2,297 (51.0)</td>
<td>4,507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 40</td>
<td>7 (0.2)</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>59 (1.3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jeju Provincial Government

Table 4. Village Fishery Production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Yield (ton)</th>
<th>Value (million KRW)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>17,521</td>
<td>37,679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>8,763</td>
<td>20,392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6,814</td>
<td>13,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3,468</td>
<td>15,276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3,634</td>
<td>17,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>3,543</td>
<td>20,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>3,647</td>
<td>20,963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>4,368</td>
<td>22,546</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jeju Provincial Government

Product type has varied over time due to marine environment changes.

Photo by Brenda Paik Sunoo.
Reasons for Decline

Commonly cited factors in the decline of Jeju haenyeo include improved educational and professional opportunities for females, a tourism-driven economy, industrialization of agro-marine labor, and effects of climate change on marine resources. The result is a near-complete break in intergenerational transmission.

There are additional factors for consideration, which are less often cited. In 1962, the Fisheries Cooperative Act was effected, which brought about two relevant changes: licensure, before a matter of regulation left up to each jamsuhoi; and at least in some fishing cooperatives, the limit of one diver per household.

The latter invites the question: how could daughters, all other factors aside, enter the diving profession? They would not have been able to gain licensure until they first married a local man and set up their own household. Another related matter is the notable independent spirit of Jeju Island people, the coastal communities in particular, and even more, the haenyeo. Government regulation of the fishing collectives may thus have seemed stringent and unwelcome, deterring mothers from encouraging their daughters to follow them as they envisioned what this change would mean in the future. A third factor is that of overfishing as a key factor in the depletion of marine resources. While the so-called 'whitening' of the local sea is generally cited as being the result of climate change, and overfishing is typically only mentioned in relation to that of the Japanese fishing fleets during the Colonial era which forced the haenyeo to migrate elsewhere for work, it is also fair to suggest that the haenyeo themselves have contributed to this resource depletion over time.

At the time of this remarkable plummet in numbers, with a pronounced drop from the 1960s to the 1970s, another factor for consideration is the 'Saemaul Undong' or New Villages economic development program of then-president Chung-hee Park. This movement saw a great increase of factories in the mainland, and there was a mass exodus of Jeju in the late 1960s as a result, mostly by young women who entered the workforce in record numbers and who saw their economic future elsewhere. At the same time, young women for the first time were more easily able to attend university, and many did so, including the daughters of Jeju haenyeo.

One of the primary features of this movement was the transition, forcibly at times, from traditional to modern methods. Just as the shamans were persecuted and made to lay down their sacred tools in the public square, forswearing their profession, so too might the haenyeo have felt that they were next in line -- that their very un-modern profession would also be a target of this policy. Surely, public opinion of them and their work, already at a consistent low over time, would have plummeted.

The wetsuit, implemented in the 1970s, allowed the haenyeo a greater degree of safety. It also required them to work longer hours and for more of the year, however. Far from an economic boon, as resources dropped and prices did not increase to match, they would have found themselves working longer hours for the same income -- an unappealing factor to mother and daughter alike. Additionally, having to wear weight belts not only brings new ailments, but also counteracts the feeling of freedom in the water cited by many of the divers.

Tourism and aquaculture industries are also to blame. The former became the standard as of the 1970s, displacing the agricultural and marine industries as the primary focus. Increasingly, haenyeo would find that work related to tourism was easier and less dangerous than the diving work, and more lucrative. Aquaculture, or fish farms, dot the coastline of this island, and render the very work of the haenyeo as unnecessary in this modern age. Their discharge also both pollutes the surrounding water and creates unnatural algae plumes, thereby disrupting the eco-system.

Methods of preservation both public and private have been introduced. The government provides compensation toward licensure fees, medical treatment (since 1997, but officially ensured with a 2006 ordinance, amended in 2008), wetsuits and other safety measures; a haenyeo museum, annual festival, and summer school program all serve to increase awareness.

II. Haenyeo Decline and Preservation

The work of Jeju haenyeo is undergoing such a renaissance, with media and artists alike portraying them as highly skilled, living knowledge banks of the world's 'power women' to the 'strong women of Jeju'.

The core concepts of cultural preservation are relevance, reframing, and replacability. First, to retain a traditional practice, it must remain relevant to the modern era. An example of this can be found in the "galot" (persimmon-dyed clothing) fashion designers

have been introduced. The government provides compensation toward licensure fees, medical treatment (since 1997, but officially ensured with a 2006 ordinance, amended in 2008), wetsuits and other safety measures; a haenyeo museum, annual festival, and summer school program all serve to increase awareness. Following "heritage" status at provincial and national levels, UNESCO recognition for haenyeo as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is now sought. In the 2012 IUCN World Conservation Congress (WCC) held on Jeju, 10,000 ecology specialists learned about Jeju haenyeo, passing an international resolution for their preservation. Similarly, in 2014 Business and Professional Women International held their triennial congress on Jeju and highlighted the haenyeo as indigenous businesswomen, thereby bringing the world's 'power women' to the 'strong women of Jeju'.

Reframing refers to viewing something familiar in a new way. The work of Jeju haenyeo is undergoing such a renaissance, with media and artists alike portraying them as highly skilled, living knowledge banks of the world's 'power women' to the 'strong women of Jeju'.
“I’ve never been ashamed of being a haenyeo. Before... people looked down on us. Now we’re acknowledged by many people.”

Chun-hwa Ko (87)

“We have two sons and two daughters. I raised them and provided for their higher education by working as a haenyeo. All of them graduated from college. I even sent my first son to graduate school, even though I began with empty hands. While my children were growing up, we needed a lot of money. So when I wasn’t diving, I helped on my neighbors’ farms and made extra money for my children’s school expenses. After they grew up, I could buy farmland and build a house.

“I don’t envy anyone. Everything I gained was from working as a haenyeo.

“I have nine grandsons and three granddaughters. Fortunately, they already have a deep appreciation of the haenyeo’s life. I’ve never been ashamed of being a haenyeo. Before...people looked down on us. Now we’re acknowledged by many people.”

Excerpted from “Moon Tides: Jeju Island Grannies of the Sea” (2011) by Brenda Paik Sunoo.

Photo by Sung-Eun Lee.
Methods of preservation both public and private have been introduced. The government provides compensation toward licensure fees, medical treatment (since 1997, but officially ensured with a 2006 ordinance, amended in 2008), wetsuits and other safety measures; a haenyeo museum, annual festival, and summer school program all serve to increase awareness. Following “heritage” status at provincial and national levels, UNESCO recognition for haenyeo as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is now sought. In the 2012 IUCN World Conservation Congress (WCC) held on Jeju, 10,000 ecology specialists learned about Jeju haenyeo, passing an international resolution for their preservation. Similarly, in 2014 Business and Professional Women International held their triennial congress on Jeju and highlighted the haenyeo as indigenous businesswomen, thereby bringing the world’s ‘power women’ to the ‘strong women of Jeju’.

The core concepts of cultural preservation are relevance, reframing, and replicability. First, to retain a traditional practice, it must remain relevant to the modern era. An example of this can be found in the “galot” (persimmon-dyed clothing) fashion designers on Jeju today — taking what was once farmers’ work-clothes and rendering these valued natural hand-dyeing methods into high fashion. Jeju haenyeo culture must similarly continue to evolve, with increasingly modern facilities and more.

Reframing refers to viewing something familiar in a new way. The work of Jeju haenyeo is undergoing such a renaissance, with media and artists alike portraying them as highly skilled, living knowledge.

Memorialization and Recognition

The women divers of Jeju and their profession have been well memorialized, in the form of documentary film, photography, books, commercial articles, a dedicated museum, art exhibitions, site-specific sculptures and visual art throughout the island, and much more. The haenyeo today are sought after, forums and seminars are held in their name, and they are -- in some ways -- finally given the community stature that they deserve. While still seen as a dangerous form of manual labor requiring little formal education, nevertheless there is a fair measure of understanding in the society that theirs is a unique and difficult profession to be respected.

This unique skillset and its adherents is thus honored and memorialized; without a renewal of intergenerational transmission, however, the culture cannot sustain itself.

Preservation Efforts and Options

Methods of preservation both public and private have been introduced. The government provides compensation toward licensure fees, medical treatment (since 1997, but officially ensured with a 2006 ordinance, amended in 2008), wetsuits and other safety measures; a haenyeo museum, annual festival, and summer school program all serve to increase awareness. Following "heritage" status at provincial and national levels, UNESCO recognition for haenyeo as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is now sought. In the 2012 IUCN World Conservation Congress (WCC) held on Jeju, 10,000 ecology specialists learned about Jeju haenyeo, passing an international resolution for their preservation. Similarly, in 2014 Business and Professional Women International held their triennial congress on Jeju and highlighted the haenyeo as indigenous businesswomen, thereby bringing the world’s ‘power women’ to the ‘strong women of Jeju’.

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II. Haenyeo Decline and Preservation

banks of the marine environment, sustainable marine harvesting practices, and collective economics. Jeju haenyeo represent a "sisterhood," or strong female community based on a common cultural practice. While such communities of divers are known in surrounding coastal regions, their practice could spread throughout the world via cultural exchange programs.

In attendance at WCC was world-renowned oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle. Still diving at age 78, she shares a kinship with Jeju haenyeo. Dr. Earle suggested reframing the haenyeo as "indigenous marine biologists" who could catalog their findings of the marine environment, compensated by government or private concern.

In a similar vein, the Jeju Education Department could create a program whereby haenyeo taught students at all levels about marine science and preservation. An "Ieodo Story Hour" in public libraries is a related option. Haenyeo influence in marine biology and environmental science programs would be equally viable in the university setting. Similarly, haenyeo could team with the university’s business department for a "Jeju Haenyeo Model of Collective Economics," based on their commercial practices. A comparable program could be developed in the political science department: "Jeju Haenyeo Model of Civil Disobedience," based on haenyeo protests during Japanese occupation. A corresponding "Jeju Haenyeo Scholarship" for promising female students could be created.

The sport of free-diving is gaining favorable attention globally as athletic, unique, even beautiful. The work of haenyeo could be perceived similarly, to increase its appeal to youth. The haenyeo’s famed cardiopulmonary capacity, developed as a result of repeated diving, could be deemed a health benefit. Regular diving, however, also brings health concerns. The "divers' syndrome" includes chronic headaches, tinnitus, digestive problems, and an increased risk of cerebro-vascular accident or "stroke." With controlled amounts of diving and a seasonal approach, plus a dedicated health regimen, this concern decreases.

Art and media also bear responsibility for haenyeo preservation, by portraying them respectfully — and by recompense. As the haenyeo are endlessly interviewed, filmed, and otherwise featured, they must be duly compensated. An annual "Ieodo Art Contest and Exhibition" of both foreign and native artists could be held in honor of Jeju haenyeo — who benefit directly from the proceeds. The literary and academic communities additionally must help. Haenyeo folk wisdom, myths and stories, spiritual rituals, and practical knowledge of both their profession and the marine environment are invaluable. This immense, collectively contained body of knowledge must be carefully preserved. The inclusion of "foreign ambassadors for haenyeo" in preservation endeavors is another vital element; if a practice is to continue, worldwide acknowledgment and support can have powerful influence.

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Haenyeo folk wisdom, myths and stories, spiritual rituals, and practical knowledge of both their profession and the marine environment are invaluable.
“It was a tough life that no youngling these days would understand. My body wasn’t strong enough to get into the deep water, so gathering seaweed and mostly agar was my main harvest. Before there was a rubber wetsuit, we wore ‘sog-ot,’ which was a white cloth used to cover parts of our body. Of course, it was freezing cold to dive into the water with clothing that was hardly waterproof. But it was part of our job as haenyeo. Withstanding the coldness.

“Someday, haenyeo may no longer be a real job but a mere part of Jeju history. But it certainly is a unique culture and technique that needs to be preserved. I would be so proud if the haenyeo’s lives, including mine, would be acknowledged as a world heritage. It was a great struggle. But it was worth it.”

Excerpted from an article by Han-nim Song, published in Jeju Weekly on 3/9/2012.

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Changing Social Attitudes

Traditionally, the women divers were not looked upon favorably. While recognized for their ability to generate income and as hard-working and diligent, they nevertheless occupied one of the lower rungs of society: with minimal education, doing dirty and dangerous manual labor in the fields of both farm and sea, unsophisticated, often working side-by-side or in place of their men, wearing minimal clothing with little concern for what others thought of them. It has been said that Jeju women occupied two distinct spaces during the past several hundred years in which Confucianism, and gender roles, have been emphasized: the inner ring of mid-mountain villages with their mainland aristocratic scholars and artists exiled to Jeju by the royal court, and the outer ring of coastal villages with little interest in a Confucian social order when there was work to be done.

In the first half of the 20th century, Jeju women divers were among the first to demonstrate against the Japanese colonialists -- first on behalf of their own economic interests, but soon on the premise of independence. Following the time of terror, the period from 1947 to 1954 which began with a chaotic interim government, military and police raids and mass executions in the name of ‘anti-communism’ and ended with Korea’s civil war, the New Villages Movement ushered in an unprecedented economic development and modernization. As a result, traditional economic practices were frowned upon and even, in many cases, forbidden. As Korea, including Jeju, rushed toward modernity, young women’s eagerness for higher education and ‘clean’ professions perhaps brought a fresh sense of shame on the haenyeo -- as they pushed their daughters to do anything other than follow in their mothers’ footsteps.

By the 1980s, however, the Minjung (people’s) movement had emerged. In addition to demonstrations, in the shadow of successive military dictatorships, for a true democracy, there was a renewal of interest in folk art and traditional ways, not as a return to the past or rejection of modernity but as a celebration of the common folk. Perhaps it was also a longing for simpler ways of living as Korea rushed forward at a globally unprecedented rate of development. This, coupled with Jeju’s conversion by the 1970s to a tourism-based economy, had the dual impact of elevating the haenyeo profession as noble while at the same time rendering it less economically necessary than ever before.

As the tourism industry rose, it became increasingly apparent that the diving women represented a unique feature of Jeju culture, and they became a commodity of tourism. The ‘Strong Jeju Woman’ and other motifs emerged, and their iconic status continued to be elevated. At the same time, however, all intergenerational transmission had come to a halt, and it cannot be said that their social status raised concurrently. They still pushed their daughters to other work; the communities still saw them as performing manual labor, however specialized; professional women were reluctant to admit that they were the daughters and granddaughters of haenyeo.

This social attitude, while mitigated, prevails today, coupled with bemusement, and perhaps embarrassment, on the part of some that foreigners might be interested in the haenyeo.

The UN’s public valuing of indigenous knowledge is helping to change this, as is the possibility of UNESCO status for Jeju haenyeo as indigenous cultural heritage. The recent WCC on Jeju, in which the world’s environmental specialists viewed the haenyeo as indigenous marine biologists and stewards of the sea, and the BPW Congress, which valued them as indigenous businesswomen alongside the world’s power women, have no doubt contributed to an elevation in their image beyond the iconic or romanticized. Most recently, one can hear the diving women referred to as skilled, unique, athletic, legendary, courageous, and a treasure.
Like any traditional practice, the free-diving profession of Jeju has evolved over time. Historic records of the island’s shellfish tributes to the king date as far back as 503 AD; a document of 1629 is the first to include the term ‘jamnyeo’ thereby indicating female gender. There is no clear historical indication of when the profession became exclusively female-dominated, though it would seem to be by the early 18th century.

The term ‘haenyeo’ was first mentioned in a document of 1791, though ‘jamsu’ (for diving itself) and ‘jamnyeo’ or ‘jomnyeo’ (woman diver) were in use locally. ‘Haenyeo’ became a required term during the Japanese Colonial period (1910-1945), as it relates closely to Japanese language. Though controversial as a result, Jeju government recently determined to adopt the term ‘haenyeo’ for tourism and other public purposes and asked that all collectives begin using the term exclusively.

The only time that the divers are known to have become political demonstrators was during the Colonial era. Convinced that they were not getting a fair price from the Japanese for their goods, and that Japanese fishing fleets working the waters around Jeju were causing rapid depletion of marine resources that forced many divers to migrate for work elsewhere, the haenyeo rose in protest, demonstrating first in Sehwa Village and then elsewhere, ultimately achieving some measure of success though a number of movement leaders were jailed in the process.

One of the more striking changes in the profession can be seen in costume and equipment. The tools have changed little, except for the buoy (“tewak”) which is now styrofoam rather than gourd. Dress, however, has changed entirely: the specialized cotton swimming costumes, streamlined for swimming and diving but providing no thermal protection, have been replaced by 3-piece rubber wetsuits and fins first introduced in the 1970s. The thermal properties of the suit permits longer diving hours, especially in winter months; its buoyancy, however, has necessitated the use of weight belts, causing strain and physical ailments not seen prior. Goggles, too, have given way to face masks, though the use of breathing apparatus remains strictly forbidden by the government, to prevent overfishing.

The bulteok, or outdoor fire pit at which the women changed clothing, warmed themselves after diving, and conducted the business of their association, is no more. Today’s business takes place in the fishing collective building, changing facilities are modernized in most villages, divers often travel by car or motorbike rather than walking to the sea as a group, and cellphones are common. With the loss of this cultural feature, the element of women’s cultural space that it represented was also sacrificed, though surely the divers’ comfort was increased with indoor facilities and modern plumbing.

Cultural features are also waning. Although the shamanist tradition continues and rituals are conducted regularly, the attendance by devotees is typically low, giving way to researchers and media representatives. The underpinning mythology is still known by the elders but details often differ considerably from one storyteller to the next, and true belief or worship is often in question. The labor songs of old are no longer used, though many divers remember and can sing them. Even the camaraderie and bondedness, once the dominant feature of this mutual aid society, is less apparent today, according to a variety of divers.

As the world modernizes around them the haenyeo have continually attempted to adapt as needed. Whether there is a place in this era for such a traditional practice, however, remains to be seen.
Mikhail Karikis
Artist of SeaWomen project

“One thing that I was very interested in when I was surrounded by the haenyeo and their work was the degree of intuitive work and wildness, and this connection with nature and the elements, and their self-sufficiency. I felt that if there can be a community that can operate independently to a certain degree, against the current trend of globalization, even though they’re vanishing, there is a glimmer of hope that we can see a small model, a small example, of how that is possible.

“I hope for the haenyeo to find a way to achieve some kind of recognition and happiness within their community. I don’t think it’s for the state, or for me, or for anyone else to determine what’s to become of the haenyeo community. They are perfectly capable to lead their own future. We just need to create, and this is what I think I’m trying to create, the right kind of ground for people to receive that, to understand what the haenyeo might wish or the context of their wishes. And I think that sometimes in politics, positions are taken that are really removed from the actual reality on a particular profession or community. So if we become sensitized to what their work is about, and what their community is about, then we might be more accepting of the decisions that they might want to take, that the haenyeo community might want to take for their community.”


Note: UK artist Mikhail Karikis created a video installation artwork on Jeju haenyeo called ‘SeaWomen’ that has been exhibited multiple times internationally. It was his stated purpose to give a global ‘voice’ to the haenyeo.

“I hope for the haenyeo to find a way to achieve some kind of recognition and happiness within their community.”
Conclusion

It is without any doubt that the Jeju women divers are representatives of a remarkable profession and set of cultural practices, worthy of preservation. It is also clear that the continuation of this tradition will remain challenging without intergenerational transmission. The best hope for their future is one of adaptation, to a reorganization of their work and culture in a form that is once again relevant to the modern-day. A number of such options have been presented, and many other preservation efforts have already been engaged at both the governmental and civic levels.

The women themselves are finally receiving the recognition they so richly deserve. Yet they are the first to say that their work is difficult and dangerous, that they do not wish it on their daughters or granddaughters, and that they entered this profession only because they had no other opportunities for economic gain. Even so, they also speak with pride of their work, and fondness of their community, as well as longing and a sense of loss for its passing. Perhaps, as many are already of advanced age, they mourn their own mortality as well. Surely, they represent a Jeju already past, the Jeju of old that can never be regained. And this is something that is presently being mourned by all Jeju people, even as they embrace modernity.

A living tradition. And just how many places remain in the world that can make such a claim?
The haenyeo culture surrounding this profession is very rich indeed, with a backdrop of shamanist rites and goddess mythology, labor songs, costume, community practices, oral transmission and organic democracy around a seaside firepit, foods, and a unique dialect.

In order to repeatedly enter the dark and dangerous waters in which they have all seen sister divers perish, the haenyeo have developed a complex belief system based on the island’s 5000-year old shamanist tradition. The divers pray for benevolence to the dragon king and queen of the sea, entreating their youngest (favored) son to intercede on their behalf.

They also worship a vast number of deities, many of them fierce goddesses, in annual village rites as well as private home rituals and shrine visits. There are many shamans who collaboratively facilitate these proceedings, generally as bonded members of the community. Though the number of devotees is waning, many rituals are maintained, and it is the shaman’s oral history and the goddess-oriented mythology that provide clues to the haenyeo culture.

The ‘bulteok’ or seaside firepit surrounded by a low stone wall was the traditional meetingplace for all diving and community business as well as practical matters such as warming one’s body after diving, and changing clothes. Following the advent of wetsuits, the bulteok for the purpose of warming and changing clothes was less necessary than before; with the construction of modern changing facilities beginning around 1985, it was replaced entirely, though many such relics remain.

Diving costumes, equipment and labor songs have also changed over the years; the equipment is now manufactured and somewhat synthetic, latex wetsuits and fins as well as weight belts have replaced cotton swimming costumes, and the songs are seldom utilized any longer.

The lyrics of these songs provide keen insight into the haenyeo culture, practices, and psyche.

The island has a unique dialect, distinct from that of the Korean mainland in vocabulary, pronunciation and grammatical structures. It retains some features of archaic Korean language long ago abandoned by other regions, vocabulary developed locally and often differing even between regions of the island itself, and both pronunciation and grammar which stem from the very practical needs of an agro-marine society.

Nearing extinction, it is largely the haenyeo community that maintain this native language, with efforts for preservation being implemented.

For more information on the very rich cultural milieu in which the haenyeo profession is situated, please see Book II of this series.
International artists have joined in as well. Multimedia artist Mikhail Karikis (UK) created a video installation called SeaWomen (2012) which has had multiple exhibitions; photojournalist Brenda Paik Sunoo (US) authored "Moon Tides: Jeju Island Grannies of the Sea" (2011), and textile artist Leonie Castelino (US) created a work in Korean 'bojagi' style based on one of Sunoo's photographs. Photographer David Alan Harvey of Magnum Photos (US) has recently filmed the haenyeo for an upcoming book; filmmaker Dahlia Gerstenhaber (IS) created "Haenyeo Women of the Sea" (2006); and, Kevin Sawicki and Alex Igidbashian (US) made "Haenyeo: Women of the Sea" (2013), which has shown in more than 20 film festivals and garnered several prizes.

International scholarly journals, such as Historic Environment, Marine Policy, Korean Studies (Hawaii), Joint Bone Spine, Population Ecology, Asian Journal of Women's Studies, and Ecological Economics, have published research articles on haenyeo. Jeju Island is also a major convention destination, enticing events which often in turn spotlight the haenyeo; two recent such events of note were the World Conservation Congress of IUCN, and the world congress of Business and Professional Women International.

For more information concerning the global representation of Jeju haenyeo, please see Book II of this series.

Anne Hilty, PhD, is a cultural health psychologist from New York. She has lived primarily in South Korea since early 2005 and on Jeju Island since 2010, now dividing her time between Jeju and Hong Kong. She is the director of EastWest Psyche Ltd., a global consulting firm based in Hong Kong.

Dr. Hilty has written and presented extensively on the topic of Jeju haenyeo, the shamanism that represents their core belief system, and Jeju Island culture overall. She is the author of Jeju Island: Reaching to the Core of Beauty (2011), and more than 200 newspaper and magazine articles. She has been designated as a Foreign Ambassador for Jeju Haenyeo (2011) and as Honorary Ambassador for Jeju Island (2014), both by government appointment, and is a graduate of the Jeju Haenyeo Summer School (2012).

In the 2012 World Conservation Congress (IUCN) held on Jeju Island, Dr. Hilty helped to write the motion for support of Jeju Haenyeo as indigenous stewards of the marine environment, which was passed into resolution. Her article on Jeju haenyeo was featured in a special WCC edition of Dynamic Jeju, distributed to the 10,000 global environmental experts in attendance. At that congress, she also met at length with renowned oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle, to discuss the profession and plight of the haenyeo. Additionally, Dr. Hilty served as Congress Organizer for the triennial congress of Business and Professional Women International, held on Jeju Island in May of 2014, at which Jeju haenyeo were prominently featured as indigenous businesswomen. She continues to work for the honoring and preservation of Jeju haenyeo.
Book 1
Jeju Haenyeo: Stewards of the Sea

Photo by Sung-Eun Lee.

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