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Jeju Jamsu [Women Divers]:

A Gatherer, a Vocational Class, a Commercial Diver, and/or a Free Diver?

Prof. Chul-In Yoo
Cheju National University
Jeju-do 690-756 KOREA
email: chulin@cheju.ac.kr

I would like to talk about Jeju Jamsu[潛嫂] in three aspects: terminology, history, and mode of production. Three aspects are related to each other. Jamsu are women who dive without an aid of air apparatus and catch shellfish and seaweed underwater. They are known as Haenyeo[海女] to outsiders, while they call themselves Jamsu or Jamnyeo[潛女] and sometimes Haenyeo. The term Jamsu is widely used throughout Jeju Island, but, in the northeastern coast of it including Gujwa-eup, the term Jamnyeo is more frequently used than Jamsu (Han 2001). Among Jamsu, Jamnyeo, and Haenyeo, which one is the best term referring to them? The words of Jamsu and Jamnyeo are native or folk terms, while the word of Haenyeo has become popular in everyday life as well as in academia as an analytic term.

The word of Jamnyeo appears in various records during the Joseon period (1392-1910). It also appears in various records of Japan particularly from the 8th to 12th century (Kim 1999: 22, 40-47). The term Haenyeo was introduced to Jeju Island probably for the first time during Japanese occupation (1910-1945) when Jeju Haenyeo Fishery Cooperative was established in 1920. The word of Haenyeo, pronounced as Ama in Japanese, has been widely used in Japan. The term Haesa(海士) referring to male divers in Japan is also pronounced as Ama. Furthermore, another terms Danin and Baeksurang(白水郎), which appear in various historical records of Japan referring to breath-holding divers, are pronounced as Ama. In Japan, Ama mean breath-holding divers to catch something underwater, regardless of

written Chinese characters.

At present in Korea, Jamsu is an official term in a law about fishery and in a fishery cooperative. But it is not known well when the term Jamsu began to be used officially, in written records, and in everyday life of women divers in Jeju. It is also not closely examined why the term Jamsu became an official term instead of more popular term, Haenyeo. With regard to the terminology, however, it is worthwhile to notice the claims of several scholars, including Kang (1970), Han (1987), Chun (1992), and Ko (2000), that Haenyeo is the term which Japanese adopted to look down on them during Japanese occupation. I do not agree with them in that there is no clue to assume that Japanese called Jeju women divers Haenyeo (海女) in order to despise them. There is also no clue to assume that Japanese called Japanese divers Ama (海女) in contempt of them. Of course, I admit that the term Haenyeo, which is literally translated into women of the sea in Los Angeles Times (Efron 1997), was introduced to our lexicon with Japanese occupation. It comes not from Haenyeo as a Japanese word in itself, however, but from the popular perception, even today, that only poor and uneducated girls become divers (Brown 2001: 41) that the term Haenyeo connotes contempt, if any, upon them (Kim 1999: 44). Social prejudices against women divers may be compensated with economic power and freedom that they gain from diving practice, especially for young women divers in their thirties (Yoo 1998).

Terminology is not simply a matter of choice among three terms referring to women divers, but a reflection of them as a historical being in a mode of production. A gatherer of shellfish in a subsistence economy can be traced on Jeju Island at least to 300 B.C., since Sangmo-ri shell mounds, where more shellfishes including abalone and top shells than in other archaeological sites on Jeju Island were found, dates around 300 B.C. An abalone was also found in Bukchon-ri rock-shelter that dates back to 2,000 B.C. However, we cannot know whether such a gatherer in a subsistence economy is an underwater diver or a gatherer in shallow water and at the seashore.

A vocational class recorded as Jamnyeo existed in a tributary mode of production during the Joseon dynasty. Records show that Jamnyeo have been diving at least since the early Joseon dynasty, and the shellfish trading network with Japan and China can be traced to early in the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), seventeenth century Japan (Kalland 1995, recited from Wright 2001). In the Joseon period, there had once been a division of labor by sex

regarding the dive fishery in Jeju Island. Male divers called Pojak(鮑作) caught abalone in deep water, while female divers called Jamnyeo caught seaweed. During or after the 17th century only women have become to dive. Why did only women become to dive in those days? This question is very important to understand that now the breath-holding divers in Jeju Island are all women, but we don't have enough information or records to answer it. Probably, we might guess, the male-dominated Confucian ethics affected such a change. Otherwise, because the female is better suited to this work than the male (Hong & Rahn 1967), only the women survived from the hardships caused by heavy burden of tributes. Nowadays almost everyone on Jeju Island agrees that women can hold their breath longer than men (Brown 2001: 42).

A commercial diver called Haenyeo in a capitalist mode of production appeared as an occupation along with Japanese colonialism and capitalism. The women divers whom we have in mind are not Jamnyeo in a tributary mode of production during the Joseon dynasty. They are Haenyeo as a laborer or a commercial diver in a capitalist mode of production. One of the vanguards of Japanese capitalism was a group of Japanese Ama that had dived in the sea near Bangeojin and Pohang since 1883. Japanese and Korean fishery traders or brokers in the mainland Korea who exported seaweed including agar(天草) to Japan began to hire Jeju Haenyeo in 1895. Since then, Jeju Haenyeo became a typical seasonal laborer who used to leave from Jeju Island and stay for a considerable period in mainland Korea, Japan, and Russia. They could make a good sum, even though brokers exploited them. After Jeju Haenyeo went abroad to dive, the number of Japanese Ama diving in the sea of mainland Korea was decreasing and they disappeared finally in 1929, because the cost of hiring Jeju Haenyeo is cheaper than that of hiring Japanese Ama (Matsuda 1934). Haenyeo operate alone, but some of Ama need a helper in a boat. The number of diving days of Haenyeo in a month is more than that of Ama, because the sea temperature in the southern coast of the Korean peninsula is lower than that in Japan.

Now in Jeju Island, each Eochongye [local fishery cooperative] at a village has a Jamsuhoe [association of women divers]. There are 100 local fishery cooperatives and 5,678 women divers as of December 2000 in Jeju Island. At the peak, there were over 23,000 women divers in 1965, when they were about 21% of total population of women over 15 years old and about 77% of total fishermen in Jeju Island. During 1960s, it was natural for

girls in a coastal village to begin to work in shallow water at the age of 11 or 12 and to think of diving as a lifelong profession. The fact that diving is a lifelong profession is unique to Jeju Jamsu and Japanese Ama. According to Plath and Hill (1987), most Japanese Ama don't peak in their ability until they are in their fifties, due to the extensive knowledge of the reef required to bring in a consistently high catch. Their diving is a craft and a trained and intelligently directed live-ware of the human body (Yoo 1998): One young Jamsu says, We learn diving through experience. It requires both intelligence and a desire to win. A desire to win implies not only competition against others for the biggest catches but also competition against oneself. Considering that there are divers to catch pearls around the world, it is also supposed to be unique to Jeju Jamsu and Japanese Ama that their main objective is to catch food.¹ Jamsu is a kind of free diver without scuba equipment, but almost every free diver in the world dive for a fun.

Jamsu sell their produce daily through their local fishery cooperative, which takes a handling charge or a commission for each sale. For example, it is an 8.3% cut in Onpyeong-ri in 2001 (Wright 2001). The fishery cooperative controls the divers by selling the entire catch at a single daily price, controlling diving and non-diving days, and outlawing technologies other than wetsuits, flippers, glass face masks called Keun-nun, and weights. Before Jamsuhoe became a part of the local fishery cooperative, Jamsuhoe controlled Jamsu themselves. Nevertheless, they are still autonomous with regard to many aspects of diving and catching. In Onpyeong-ri, during 1970s Jamsu had to be a member of the local fishery cooperative if they wanted to dive underwater and catch something (Moon et al. 1991).

With regard to the mode of production, Haenyeo during Japanese occupation are not different from Jamsu in these days except for a technology. During 1960s, modern glass face masks called Ken-nun replaced goggles called Jogeun-nun that were used since late 19th or early 20th century (Kim 1999:116). Modern masks require the divers to have better skills to control breath-hold and to endure water pressure than goggles do (Han 1987:38). During 1970s in Jeju Island, the foam-rubber wet suits replaced crude, cold cotton bathing suits. Jamsu with modern technology can work longer and dive deeper than before. Even today at Shirohama in Japan, Ama are forbidden to wear wet suits because of controlling catches and then preserving

¹ I heard that there are sea cucumber [海蔘] divers on the Aru islands in Indonesia who trade with Chinese fish traders.

natural resources. Jamsu's autonomy in controlling diving and non-diving days, regulating working hours and the size of catch, and outlawing technologies could also control catches and preserve resources. One diver with scuba equipment could do the work of twenty free women divers in a day (Plath and Hill 1987). The failure of new divers to be recruited in the dive fishery may be one where territories are leased out to scuba diving companies (Efron 1997). The reason why even during the high technology, post-industrial period there are free divers in the dive fishery as gatherers like those in the hunting-gathering society is obviously to fit underwater surroundings and preserve resources to be used forever.

I will conclude my presentation by suggesting several pending questions and partial answers with regard to Jamsu. I suggest that the use of the term Jamnyeo is restricted to women divers in a tributary mode of production during the Joseon dynasty. If there is a good reason in distinguishing women divers during Japanese occupation from those in these days, the term Haenyeo may be restricted to refer to only women divers during Japanese occupation and after it they are called Jamsu. If not, which do we call women who choose diving as their occupation, between Haenyeo and Jamsu? We may wait for the answer to this question, until we know when the term Jamsu began to be used officially, in written records, and in everyday life of women divers in Jeju and why the term Jamsu became an official term instead of a popular term, Haenyeo. At this moment, I will use the term Jamsu as a native or folk term and the term Haenyeo as an analytic term.

Several key questions about Jamsu to be answered in a near future are as follows. Why did only women become to dive during or after the 17th century? Why do only women work as a commercial diver nowadays on Jeju Island? Which is the area where the free diving practice originated, between Jeju Island and Japan, or elsewhere? Is the fact that diving is a lifelong profession unique to Jeju Jamsu and Japanese Ama? If yes, why and how does diving become a lifelong profession only to Jeju Jamsu and Japanese Ama? Are there any other divers in the world who choose diving as their occupation or their lifelong profession? Is there any difference between the divers to catch food such as shellfish and seaweed and those to catch pearls? I hope that the First World Jamsuology Conference to be held in Jeju Island next year would answer at least partially to some of the above questions.

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