

Deep dive

Recognition and understanding of *haenyeos* role as caretakers of the seascape is needed for multispecies justice

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A deep dive into the seas of Jeju Island, South Korea, brings the role of fisherwomen called '*haenyeos*' in sea harvesting and post-harvest to the shorelines. Fisheries is a trade where men work to catch in larger numbers and women's role has only recently been highlighted in the fish food systems. But a look at the '*haenyeos*', the '*sea women*' in Jeju, with their average age in mid-60s, reveals their role as caretakers of the ecology and diverse species, in what is termed, the seascape.

The government, recognizing the fading culture, has risen to support the social group by building a museum, schools, and having the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognize them as an '*Intangible Cultural Heritage*'. However, these interventions do not suffice in maintaining the identity of *haenyeos* and the more-than human relations they share with the seascape.

My research with the women was initiated seeing their rapidly decreasing numbers and simultaneous ageing. The research sought to find the inter-generational environment knowledge and the rooted identity of *haenyeos* using the feminist political ecology lens. Ethnographic tools namely, focus groups, storytelling, oral history, transect walks, participatory observations, and interviews, led to the understanding of reciprocal and care nurtured work of *haenyeos* with the sea and with each other. But how does this relationship evolve over generations and with the current developing identity of *haenyeos* on the island?

Haenyeos have existed in Jeju since the 17th century. Their work expanded to the waters of Russia, Japan, China, and mainland Korea during the hold of imperial Japan, and later the USA in Korea. The women traditionally never used breathing equipment to dive; they began wearing the diving gear only from the 1960s. With men enlisted in military and the massacre of April 3rd, 1948, the Jeju women had no alternative but to dive for harvest and become breadwinners for the families.

Historically the *haenyeos* learned the skills from women in their family or village making it

a part of their life since a young age. The way of living and embodiment of work is continued to this day by the *haenyeos* until they are physically incapable of working. As part of my observation, I went to work with women who were mostly above 70 years old. Part of their daily routine is to head to their village shorelines across the island where the *buldteok* is situated for every *haenyeo* group. At the *buldteok*, a structure made of stone and wood, the *haenyeos* gather, change into their gear, and go to work as an extended part of the sea itself. It is an important site for all types of knowledge, information, and care work to be shared amongst the women. They converse about the sea waves, weather, routine, sales, and personal life. These women gathering in their respective groups have known each other for years, and thus, share core bonds with each other.

While accompanying the women for the day where they caught urchins in the sea to clear the seas of their over-population, observations were made about their emotive, mutually respected, and reciprocal work. The urchins caught in this season were not for personal use or sale, but rather to help other lifeforms thrive in the sea. Their tasks are written in the harvest calendar that the *haenyeos* (re)reproduce annually for their harvest and the health of the seascape that they serve. Their knowledge of the waters they dive in, the seabed they explore, and the species they catch is sharpened by years of work in their seascapes. The *haenyeos* explained, "*the more delicious urchins are found in deeper waters in particular seasons, when the octopus are pregnant, baesam (sea cucumber) are found under rocks as they grow faster with sand they consume underneath*".

Their relationship doesn't just end at harvesting but extends to caring for the multiple species existing in the seascape. Some of the older *haenyeos* shared, "*we spotted dolphins in the sea and would make the sound 'bae allae, bae allae,' that would warn them to go underwater when the trader and war ships were passing*". I participated in the diving classes for the new *haenyeos* at *Hansupul* School where the women threw back whatever they caught during the lesson. Additionally, the older



Haenyeos are getting ready to go into the sea. Historically the *haenyeos* learned the skills from women in their family or village making it a part of their life since a young age

haenyeos taught the students how to poke and kill an urchin, and feed the urchin's 'uni' to a school of fish. They were taught that the catch is caught for sale as well as the fish. These important conditions to work reciprocally and respectfully co-exist occurs naturally in *haenyeos* way of working and living with the multiple species.

The last part in this seascape is the 'commoning' (close relations) that the *haenyeos* share with each other. *Buldteok* is an important site where the younger *haenyeos* care for the older *haenyeos* when preparing for the sea. While the older *haenyeos* lead the way through the rocks skillfully, the young march at the back to keep everyone moving carefully. These relations amongst the women go beyond the waters and emerge on land in the form of the *haenyeos* visiting each other, opening shops together, helping each other farm, and engage in 'pluriactivity'. Pluriactivity, an engagement in alternative forms of earning income has been used by *haenyeos* more recently. The move to these alternatives has been driven by the increasing opportunities in the market, and the younger generation moving to cities with

growing aspirations. The social reproduction of the group is therefore hindered by the development policies in the region. Research into the structures 'developing in the background of the *haenyeos* work' has sought to explain how the social reproduction is politicized and nurturing new identities amongst the younger *haenyeos*.

Over the years Jeju has seen the invasion and imperial hold of Japan, followed by control of the USA, with neoliberal policies now rooted in political and economic decisions. The politicization of the social group was inevitable with the village cooperatives taking shape in the island creating divisions in the waters. The older *haenyeos* narrated, "I worked in Yeonpyeong before marriage, then in the mainland, before moving to Sinsan-ri"; "I went with a group of 10 girls to Taeheung-ri to have better earnings and returned to their village". The creation of boundaries problematizes the *haenyeos* mobility and manifests a material obstacle in their relationship with the seascape. It causes fissures in the flexible work that was embodied by the older *haenyeos* and has culturally shifted meanings for new identity to emerge.

A look at the 'haenyeos', the 'sea women' in Jeju, with their average age in mid-60s, reveals their role as caretakers of the ecology

New identity is further explored through the 'outsider' role inherited by the younger *haenyeos*. The embodiment of becoming a *haenyeo* is hindered by their origin; thus those from outside Jeju, unable to speak 'Jejuan', have limitations to train and be accepted in a village. Women from outside of Jeju join the school to train in controlled sea environments lacking the information about the deeper seabed. They have a short three-month internship before seeking approval from all the *haenyeos* of a village. The *Jejuan*, recognized as a dialect by the state, is different from the language spoken by the people of Jeju. Lack of recognition of *Jejuan* language limits the inter-generational learning and communication.

The focus groups at *Hansupul* school with the younger *haenyeos* revealed why few are accepted in villages. "The village cooperatives get money that gets divided amongst the *haenyeos*. Increase in the number of *haenyeos* would mean more division of money within the group". The emergence of new identity is explained by these material interventions of political and economic processes. The pressure and limitations in time, origin, and language that is spoken by the older *haenyeos* prove to immobilize the younger *haenyeos*.

The new identity forming is attracted mostly by the UNESCO inscribing the *haenyeos* as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. Eight out of 10 of the younger *haenyeos* that I worked with were from outside Jeju and had aspired to be a *haenyeo* after the policy shift. Narratives built from such institutional interventions lead to a spectacle view of the *haenyeos* and a legacy to remember rather than to survive. Commodification of the older *haenyeos* then manifests in their livelihoods creating a crisis in social reproduction.

While the narrative shaped by UNESCO seeks to preserve the culture, it has exaggeratingly commodified and romanticized the role and agency of *haenyeos*. Currently there are no set boundaries of the scale in which the cultural project expands. Further, there is lack of agency given to older *haenyeos* to shape their own narrative. At this critical juncture, capital production becomes a priority for not just the macro-institutions at play, but also for the *haenyeos* to sustain themselves. Further, the *haenyeos* want their children and grandchildren growing up in mainland Korea to succeed in mainstream careers. Social reproduction thus is no longer the goal for either party.

This creates a gap in the policy-decisions where the institutions do not realize the importance of *haenyeos* in sustaining the entire ecology of Jeju. For generations these women

have been the first to notice the changes taking place in their ecology that encompasses both their bodies, the sea, and the non-human beings. However, the underplay of gender and power dynamic in the policy-making and implementation is made worse with the immobile and ageing population, and limited ability to transfer their traditional knowledge.

When the current economic policies prioritize the national interests with neighboring Japan in terms of sea use, the most impacted agents are not taken into consideration. In an ecology, not only humans live, but the multiple species interacting in the sea also thrive. The release of waters from sewage treatment plants from Japan into the Jeju waters contributes to the rapid decline of these sea species. The waters are also quoted not to be safe for swimming by the *haenyeos*. However, these concerns are raised by the *haenyeos* in the village in an isolated manner, lacking the possibility of collective mobilization. Here the older *haenyeos* hold the key to inform the younger *haenyeos*, policymakers, and state narratives about the shifting ecology of the seascape. Instilling the rightful decision-making powers to the *haenyeos* can stall the degradation of the seascape and the ongoing multi-species injustice.

Opposing the capitalistic ambitions of the political and economic structures needs to be done by creating the counter-narrative of the resilient, reciprocal, caring role of *haenyeos*. Bridging the gaps of knowledge between the different generations of *haenyeos* calls for the recognition of the current ambitions of the younger *haenyeos*. Collective identity can only be formed by a collective action across generations. A shift in the narrative from the legacy of *haenyeos* to the current need for them to protect the seas is required. Acknowledgement of the failure to recognize the lack of power given to the *haenyeos*, the sea, and the non-human species within state policies is essential for this shift.

My research attempts to shed light on these structural failures that inhibit understanding of the entangled existence of inter-species in the seascape. Recognizing the traditional knowledge that takes form of food, prayers, spirit, relationships, and beyond brings the narrative of the *haenyeos* to the table for discussion. It is a voice that needs to be heard loud in the spaces where policies are reflected and formed, with involvement from academics, researchers, government agents, collaborating with older and, younger *haenyeos*, and independent fishworkers. ❏

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