



## Review:

### **Ok-Kyung Pak: *Les Plongeurs Jamnyo (Haenyo) de Jeju en Corée et le Néo-Confucianisme, une mythologie double*, Éditions Ides et Calended, 2018, Fondation Culturelle Musée Barbier-Mueller.**

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Ok-Kyung Pak is well known for her work with the Minangkabau, a matrilineal society in Sumatra. This new study is of particular interest to anyone working with matricultural systems and the anthropology of women, but suitable for the general public. It is a beautifully illustrated monograph, enriched by the author's own images and those of her collaborator, local artist Koh Sing Mi. The book brings a short but exciting report of women's lives in the fishing villages of Jeju. Jeju, a small South Korean Island, has gained fame among both tourists and researchers on account of its female fishing traditions – whereby women are sustaining the economy with fishing by breath-hold diving (free diving). Women's economic self-sufficiency and their obvious responsibility for most of the governance in their community challenge the norms of the local Confucian patriarchal kinship system that grants men high status, and entrusts them with official political functions and the ritual care of ancestors. Ok-Kyung Pak's contribution resides in her attention to all aspects of the Jeju kinship system and how those concretely affect individual women's lives. *Les plongeurs Jamnyo* is a descriptive work, centered on a fishing village on Udo, one of the small islands around Jeju; it is not a theoretical discussion. Nevertheless, Ok-Kyung Pak has produced an informed ethnography that pays attention to operative concepts, and demonstrates a sound awareness of the complex problematics of kinship studies (with references to *Living Kinship in the Pacific* (2015) by C. Toren and S. Pauwels (eds.), and to *What Kinship Is ... And is Not*, by M. Sahlins (2013)).

Known as *jamnyo* [divers], a term of self-reference, or *haenyo* [sea women], a derogatory term first introduced by the colonial Japanese authorities then propagated by Korean administrators and outside researchers, the fishing women live in the coastal villages and the smaller islands surrounding Jeju. Their numbers are steadily declining but they have left an indelible mark on the history of the island. Unlike the Japanese *ama*, women divers and abalone fishers who enjoyed the respect of their neighbors and even of the emperor, the *jamnyo* have survived centuries of contempt, hardship, exploitation, catastrophes, and wars. Through it all, they managed to keep their families fed as well as

to pay tributes due to the ruling powers of the days through their harvests of shellfish (abalone), seaweed, and other sea-products.

Jeju island is an unfertile volcanic land, about 1840 square kilometers, located in the Korean straits. It has a difficult climate with uncertain and hostile weather. The land is extremely dry, stony and infertile except for small carefully tended farming plots protected by stone walls. Besides fishing, the local people have long been dependent on horticulture and herding, including horses introduced by the Mongolian armies, on the rare pastures supplemented with citrus orchards. In a more distant past, during the Koryo era and even while the Mongols controlled the land (1231-1259), men were fishers, sailors, merchants, ship builders and high sea travelers, and they spent a great part of their time on the ocean together with their families. However, they were forced to abandon these trades, generation after generation, during the Choson era as invading armies and administrators limited their freedom. And generation after generation, women had to find means to feed their families. It would be easy to attribute the quasi-matriarchal state of Jeju island to these historical circumstances. The main contribution of this book is its refusal to accept this simplistic explanation and thus allow us to glimpse the early and active involvement of the jamnyo communities in the economic, ritual and political life of the island.

According to the author, the island of Jeju is well known in Korea, and has been studied for several decades by Korean historians and anthropologists, though usually from a continental and male perspective. Except in recent years when islanders themselves have become involved in research concerning their homeland, and with the publication of one study authored by a feminist anthropologist, Cho Hae-Jeong, (1979, 1992, 2016) Korean research on Jeju has focused on the male side of society and the failure of the continental project to convert the islanders to the Confucian social model; continental scholars usually explain this failure by invoking the poverty of the land, and in particular the absence of land suitable for rice cultivation (an explanation that takes for granted the cultural superiority of the continent) . Women, especially fishing women, have long been denigrated for their inability or unwillingness to submit to the civilizing influence of the Confucian codes of conduct governing sex and age, including the rigid female dress codes (hardly suitable for free diving), female confinement to domestic management, and the submission of women to male authority.

Ok-Kyung Pak's study is divided into five chapters, and ends with a short conclusion.

The first chapter sets the historical stage on which Jeju population and culture evolved through an extremely violent past. It is worth relating some of the details.

The history of the island, and the many small dependant islets around its shores, was set in motion by the geographical location of the Jeju archipelago, located in the ocean, 200 kilometers from the Korean peninsula, at the maritime confluence of the Chinese empire, the Japanese empire and the Korean kingdoms, all militarized states. Originally a small but fiercely independent maritime kingdom, known as Samna, Jeju suffered though centuries of invasion, exploitation, forced labor and pillage. The island was successively invaded by the early Korean kingdoms. In 938, it was subjugated by the rulers

of the Koryo Dynasty (918-1392) who officially annexed it in 1105, installed their own governors and renamed the island Jeju. The Mongols (1260-1368), once in control of Korea, seized Jeju (1273) and introduced large scale horse herding for their cavalry, as well as Buddhist temples and slavery. Back in power, the unified Korean kingdom of Koryo transformed the island into a military fortress and reduced the inhabitants to total poverty through the levy of high taxes and tributes, forced labor, and the enlisting of able-bodied men and women to serve in the Korean army. Male mortality rate (already very high), skyrocketed.

Toward the end of the Koryo era, Chinese ideology and Confucianism became influential, and the Korean government embarked on a vast program of social transformation toward a hierarchical and rational all-encompassing patriarchy. In 1392, the Koryo dynasty was replaced by the Choson (Choseon or Joseon) dynasty (1392-1910). The Choson autocratic rulers turned Jeju into their main military stronghold and a jail for exiled nobles and scholars who had become politically undesirable, and they imposed a rigid Confucian social and religious ideology on its inhabitants. Unable to administer a population who lived from and on the sea (they were called "sea nomads"), the Choson authorities forbade contacts with the continent and forced the inhabitants to abandon their maritime industries, whether trade or sea fishing. By then, women had already replaced men as primary economic contributors with fishing from the beaches and farming. In 1692, the Choson government decreed that no one would be permitted to leave the island, and Jeju people became 'foreigners'. The quarantine was to last almost two centuries, leaving the already desolate island with no adequate means of subsistence. But the women went on fishing and farming and their families survived.

In 1702, a 'purification' campaign led to the destruction of 129 traditional shamanic sanctuaries (more than half of the local shrines) and the two Buddhist temples. The events of this campaign are still alive in the collective memory. The islanders rebuilt their sanctuaries. But the high taxes and tribute led to several revolts, all severely repressed (including later protests in 1813, 1862, 1893, 1901).

In 1910, the Japanese invasion and colonization of Korea ended the administrative tutelage of Jeju by the Choson kingdom, and replaced it with a modernized system of labor exploitation and a capitalist mode of production. Men and women of Jeju were then enlisted as laborers or deported to Japan as low cost workers or miners. Imposed migration and the search for paying jobs decimated the population. The remaining inhabitants in the coastal villages were put to work forcing women to collect, between other things, seafood and enormous quantities of seaweeds from which the Japanese extracted the iodine needed for the production of gunpowder. More revolts ensued, sometimes led by women. In 1917, a revolt saw the participation of 130 *jamnyo* women. Meanwhile, women quickly learned the intricacies of overseas market forces and geopolitics. The *jamnyo* women, well organized through their traditional social systems, also got acquainted with Marxist ideology.

At the end of the Second World War, popular protest arose in Jeju, while a new international conflict engulfed Korea and opposed the international powers that supported capitalist state and economy on one side, and the pro-Russian and pro-Communists supporters on the other. The threatening division of Korea had immediate repercussions on Jeju. On the 3rd of April 1948, the Jeju population already

unhappy with the imposition of new restrictions, began a new protest. This action spurred Korea and the continental powers to intervene. With the acquiescence of the Americans, they launched a repression that lasted until the unofficial end of the Korean war in 1953. The repression resulted in large scale massacres that left 30 000 dead (a tenth of the population) and 160 burnt down villages (70% of the villages). Then Jeju was left to its ashes and memories, and forgotten by the continent. The women went on with their diving and their working the fields.

It is only in the 1960s that the local economy began to show some vitality, with the development of an export market, especially to Japan after 1970, for seaweeds, seafood (*haliotis*) and mandarine fruit,. The 1980s saw the arrival of Chinese tourists (and Chinese tourism entrepreneurs) who came in larger and larger waves, by plane and cruise ships, until the island had to cope with several millions of visitors a year; then international political tensions intervene a few years ago and tourism sharply declined. Women went on fishing, working and saving money. Meanwhile, urbanization and the globalization of the economy and communication systems, and the spreading influence of international tourism took their toll on the rural society. While in 1950, there were over 30 000 *Jamnyo* working and earning enough money to rebuild their homes and to send their daughters to school and university, in 1993, there were only about 5650 active *jamnyo*, 85% of whom were over fifty years old. By comparison, it is estimated that in the 1960s more than 20% of the island women were involved in freediving fishing.

Throughout all the exactions and invasions, and the ensuing waves of poverty, the people of Jeju survived, reconstructing the shrines, transmitting ritual texts, archiving their history, and preserving certain traits differentiating them from the continent. In particular, Ok-Kyung Pak shows the incapacity of continental authorities to impose notions of aristocracy, and especially of landed gentry, and a social hierarchy with social classes, Today, agriculture in Jeju is still pursued on small privately owned parcels of land distributed throughout the population. They are no sharecroppers and no powerful landowners. The patrilineal system imposed on the population was never firmly established, even less on the women, and it is slowly and steadily weakening,

The second chapter offers an analysis of the kinship systems on Jeju, and more particularly the system the inhabitants call *kwendang*. *Kwendang* is a localized social group and the term may refer to a matrilocal and endogamous extended family as well as to the localized village (or "family village") where its lives as a distinct community. It is managed by married women and built around women's activities. Each *kwendang* is composed of several related nuclear families, or households, headed by a married woman, working and organizing the work to produce the food, goods and services needed by her family. Both fishing and agriculture are considered women's work. The *kwendang* controls the exploitation of maritime resources and access to diving sites, and manages (and trains) the human resources held in common – the *jimnyo* of the *kwendang* dive together as a team, and the women of the *kwendang* work together in the field. In addition, the *kwendang* functions as a pool of potential marriage partners. It favors endogamy at the village level as well as at the kin group level, and, in the past, promoted sororal polygamy. Finally, *kwendangs* maintain the shamanic shrines or sanctuaries at

the center of religious life, and the relations with the powers of nature, including the goddesses ruling the ocean.

The *kwendang* system is centered and controlled by women but its descent system is not matrilineal. The *kwendang* coexists with elements of a patrilineal kinship system with exogamous clans supported by the “ideal cultural” model of Neo-Confucian rules. This system, the influence of which is relatively weak, allows the men to present themselves as being in charge of the public official scene, and to assume the full responsibility of ancestral rituals that ensure the continuity of the patrilines, primogeniture and birth rank. The oldest son resides near his parents’ house.

The conjunction of the *kwendang* and the Confucian patrilineal system results in a social organization largely divergent from the traditional Korean model: It allows an egalitarian society that diffuses rank, both gender-wise and generation-wise. The system also undermines primogeniture, refuses to give primacy to one of the genders, and results in what Cho calls “no dominant gender” relations. It supports women managing their own affairs as well as the organization of the daily life of their family and community, the management of the diving teams and the horticultural tasks, and the relationships with the other *kwendang*. It also encourages and respects the strong individualism which is valued throughout the island and is in sharp contrast with the Korean emphasis on obedience to a common norm. At a different level, and in a most interesting way, as noted by Ok-Kyung Pak, this system encourages lateral kinship ties rather than the vertical ties of Confucian lineages and clans.

It would not do justice to Ok-Kyung Pak’s analysis to conclude that the *kwendang* manages the social world of women while the patrilineal clans define the society of men. The author does not support the idea of a social world divided according to genders, for instance with men belonging to patrilines, and women forming matrilineages. She maintains that this form of bilineality is unthinkable on Jeju. It is not Jeju society but rather Jeju worldview and Jeju mythology that are gendered and bilinear. Men belong to the clans and maintain them in Confucian style, keeping the (patrilineal) genealogical charts and caring for the ancestral tombs; but at the same time, they belong to the village and to the local community of relatives managed by their wives and they participate in the economic and ritual activities of their mothers’ or wives’ *kwendang*. This participation was probably more intense in the past since we read stories of male shamans and male divers in historical texts. Meanwhile women manage their *kwendang*, its organization and its activities; they document its history and its genealogies, and defend its resources; but women also serve the patrilineal clans of their husbands where they play their role as subservient members, mothers, and guarantors of the superiority of man over woman, and of husband over wife.

The third chapter describes the activities, the collectivity and the economic contribution of the female divers to Jeju society. The fisherwomen work in teams, which are composed of women from the same village and therefore kinswomen. The work is dangerous and demands physical stamina, experience, competence and years of training, as well as discipline and cooperation between the divers. Rituals underline the ancient and always renewed kinship ties between the human inhabitants of the land and the powers of the sea, led by a giant goddess and creatrix of the island who rules the sea and gave

her life to create an all essential bridge with the continent. Indeed, in the Jeju worldview, islands cannot survive by themselves. Men, although they were formerly fishermen, divers, sailors and shipbuilders and travelled with their ships as far as Singapour, India and Northern Japan, have long lost access to the sea, partly for historical reasons; for instance, during the Choson era, they did not have the right to work on water, and an early Choson government decree explicitly forbade them to dive and work together with their wives as they used to do before the Confucian era... Other considerations could stem from the close connection between the sea and its female divine expressions, and the intimate contacts women maintain with them through prayers, offerings and actual physical care of the beaches and ocean floor, as well as the trust developed through generations of women, working together, training and depending on each other.

The fourth chapter describes the shamanic rituals, maintained and controlled by women, keeping open the connection between human beings and the world of spirits, goddesses and dead ancestors or relatives (who remain part of the community after their death), and most importantly the mostly female powers of nature, land and sea.

Shamanic rituals take place in sanctuaries dedicated to ancestral divinities or goddesses and located near their respective villages. The rituals usually last from morning to evening. Organized by the women and often by and for the divers, shamanic rituals are community affairs, they are non-authoritarian and non-hierarchical and welcome both men and women. By contrast, on the male side, male priests conduct the *pojae*: the formal Confucian night rituals addressing ancestors in the paternal line and re-affirming male ranks, without any women in attendance .

Unlike the male rituals, the various functions of local sanctuaries deal primarily with the natural world, the ocean, the wind and the volcanoes, and the world of related spirits. Rituals aim to strengthen the connections between the villages and the eighteen thousand local divinities, eighty percent of which are goddesses; to serve the individual needs of people, including healing; to secure a good harvest; or to ensure the divine protection and good will of the ocean goddesses and spirits toward the divers. Rituals also celebrate dead relatives, since they are thought to remain part of the family and to care about its well-being. Moreover, at a different level, it is through the sanctuaries that local archives are kept, and that historical events, as well as oral literature, songs and myths are remembered. The myths relate mostly the origins and early human lives of the divinities (who lived as humans before they acquire their divine status). Chief among them are the great powers of the sea. The shamanic myths, whether the grand narrative concerning the establishment of the island as a whole, or the local stories, transmit the words and the actions of the divinities as well as their reactions to historical events, and can therefore be considered both a kind of legal code, and a compilation of historical events. Shamanic myths and rituals open on a world built on the cooperation between the powers of nature, which are partially human and the human beings who are their descendants or inhabit their land. These powers favor female descent, and hint at a greater presence of female powers in the distant past, and times before the arrival of Confucianism on the island

The female communities of divers have maintained the matrilineal tradition in their own lives: For instance, they refuse patronyms, use forms of address that do not mention male kins, and call each other by such terms as: “mother of so and so”, “sister of so and so”, “sister in law of so and so”... The great powers of the ocean, and first of all the giant sea Goddess, who directly affect the female divers and the water conditions, currents and weather on the coast, are given offerings and prayers, so they will endorse the activities of the women, who, meanwhile take concrete care of the non-human beings, plants, fish and animals, and the whole ecology of the water environment, even re-seeding the weeds. The rituals renew the direct matrilineal connection between the divine beings and their human descendants.

Chapter five surveys the influence of neo-Confucianism, imported from China to Korea and to Jeju Island. Presented as an “ideal culture” that should naturally appeal to anyone, it gives men the status associated with the noble patronyms inherited from the (sometime mythical) continental aristocracy. A myth of origin dating back to the early days of Confucian influence relates the arrival (or emergence) of the three “founding brothers” and earliest patrilineal ancestors who became the first rulers of the Tamna Kingdom; tellingly, it describes the brothers finding the magical box that contained the things needed to start a civilized society: three women, a calf and a horse, and five kinds of grain seeds. Such a myth, unrelated to anything having to do with nature or with the ocean, or even with the island volcanoes, is built exclusively on the human and male side of the world, and sustains a patriarchal system of exogamous clans. This system where women have no public functions and are permitted no initiative and no ways to participate in anything but domestic tasks, had no chance to succeed in Jeju Island where women’s work had long been essential to universal survival, the more so as men were systematically targeted, weakened and decimated by the occupying colonizing powers.

Korean scholars have interpreted the cultural situation of Jeju island as a culture of compromise – a “lesser” or corrupted culture, in which people attempt to do the best they can in poor circumstances while failing in their civilizing effort; alternatively, Jeju was also presented as a « double culture » with each side antagonizing the other. Ok-Kyung Pak contends on the contrary that Jeju constructed a culture of its own on the basis of the co-existence of elements coming from the continent integrating the hierarchical Confucian system, and the non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian Indigenous culture supporting among other things the independence and self-sufficiency of women, a culture which the Confucian-trained scholars could probably not even recognize as such. Ok-Kyung Pak concludes that “the relations between the dominant national system (Confucianism in this case) and the ancient local civil society are not necessarily antagonistic, even if the old society was constrained by precariousness, marginalization and colonization” (p. 30, my translation).

Continental Korean society was not always patrilineal [as may be inferred from the Korean. shamanic Mudang women]. In the distant past, before the first or second century A,D, it was most probably bilateral and uxorilocal, with kin groups acknowledging relatives on both maternal and paternal sides and including in-laws, and with little interest or investment in social class. By contrast, Chinese-Confucian clans are purely patrilineal and exogamous, and exclude all non-consanguineal kins would-be relatives. According to Ok-Kyung Pak, Jeju may be an example of the survival of a kinship system

similar to that of the ancient pre-Confucian Korea. On Jeju, rather than being replaced by Confucianism, it combined an ideology of masculine superiority, imposed by Confucianism, with a more ancient worldview. Ok-Kyung Pak's readers are led to conclude that if everything that has value on Jeju (land, prestige, knowledge) is shared between the genders and leads to a balanced relationship between men and women, this relationship is not a product of compromise, but is due to the continuity and endurance of ancient values.

In conclusion, Ok-Kyung Pak develops a synthesis of the changes affecting contemporary Jeju society under the forces of accelerated industrialization and the disappearance of traditional ways of life; at the same time, this society is developing new perceptions of its cultural identity ("a society centered on women") intertwined with a renewal of the old kinship ties with nature in general and the ocean goddess Seolmundae Halmang in particular. For instance, since 2007, a local organization presents a new two-week festival presided by nine priestesses celebrating the giant Goddess in order to bring both the inhabitants of the island and the tourists, to renew their commitment to the values demonstrated by the *jamnyo* in their symbiotic relationship with nature.

Ok-Kyung Pak's book, *Les Plongeuses Jamnyo (Haenyo) de Jeju en Corée et le Néo-Confucianisme, une mythologie double* is intended to serve the *jamnyo* communities, and to express the respect due to the women themselves. And it reaches that goal. But for researchers and students, this book provides something else: invaluable data allowing us to better understand societies we label matrilineal or matriarchal, and their matricultural orientations.

Several themes, among the many that are mentioned, would merit a longer exploration. The juxtaposition of women-centered *Kwendang* (or family-villages) and patrilineal clan system results in a system for which the current technical definitions available to ethnologists are inadequate. Among other issues, the social and economic processes taking place in the *kwendang* do not fit in the classificatory listing of the usual types of descent systems, such as matrilineal, patrilineal, bilineal, and ambilineal, in addition to the bilateral kin groups.

One question in vogue today in Korea is the complex issue of shamanism and its role in Jeju culture. In Korean cities, since the Choson era, the imperial law forbade shamanic practices to all citizens, but the practices were kept alive by the poorer women of the lowest social classes, who were overlooked by the authorities that deemed them unworthy of notice. It may be that the women in Jeju benefited from their low status to keep their world alive. In any case, it seems to me remarkable that while the men, in their official duties, were restricted to a quasi a-historical vision centered on the past and the deeds of their ancestors (also associated with their continental origin), the women lived in a wider and richer time frame: The sanctuaries dedicated to shamanic practices, today almost completely managed by women, have long been considered by the continental rulers as the supports of the local civil society and one of the sources of its indiscipline and its refusal to be properly enrolled into Korean society – which is why in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the sanctuaries were ordered burnt throughout the island. This large-scale destruction did not have the expected consequences. The sanctuaries are still in function today. It is clear that they were not the only support of ritual life, but simply one of its



expressions; the sanctuaries were much more than buildings, and the ramifications of the ritual life extended into all aspects of daily life. More than the sanctuaries themselves, it is obvious that it is the entire intangible socio-cultural heritage –the sanctuaries, the world view, the communal links with land and sea, the relations between genders, as well as an entire corpus of oral and musical literature– that constituted the true pillar of Jeju society. And this heritage was maintained and transmitted and recreated by women. Ok-Kyung Pak remarks that the shamanic rituals, songs and texts preserved historical data and extended to more than just the local history. The shamans and their ritual communities were the keepers of the collective memory as well as of history in the European sense of the term. In addition to genealogies, diving sites, fishing rights, the locations and the boundaries of farming land and pasture, this oral archive addressed migrations, famines, forced removal, massacres, and anti-colonial struggles, insurrections and survival stories. Fulfilling the female historical responsibility presupposes an extraordinary historical awareness that may explain why and how the people on Jeju became involved early with anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements. It also reminds us that these women were “educated” in the Jeju sense, rather than the continental sense of the word, and were knowledgeable about the outside world.

For the past fifty years, the sons and daughters of the *jamnyo* have taken in their own hands the writing of the history and cultural heritage of the island in order to rewrite the history provided by and for continental accounts. In so doing, they continue to fulfill the responsibility of their mothers, and may contribute to re-insert men’s lives into history.

For some anthropologists, the case of Jeju is simply the result of the emergence of a matrilineal, even matriarchal society through a historical process that weakened the male population and prevented their participation in the economy of the island. Ok-Kyung Pak implicitly but firmly refutes that scheme. Without imposing conclusions, she refers to cultural roots older than historical references, not to explain but to describe the strong matricultural system [my expression] in place. Thus, she cites *jamnyo*’s terms of address, the reference to a female creatrix in the shamanic origin myth, the ubiquitous mentions of goddesses in the natural world and the definition of these goddesses as matrilineal ancestors, and the fact that the ocean is ruled by female forces.

For the researchers working on kinship systems, this ethnography is a welcome contribution. My own perspective is born from a critical look at kinship studies: The North American kinship theoreticians attempted in the middle of the twentieth century to postulate kinship systems following logical principles modulated by ecological and economical factors, while Asian scholars pursued the ideal conceptions of homogeneous patrilineal clans by invoking ethical considerations. Both scholarly traditions presented kinship systems as essentially detached from history and from the actual lives and choices of individuals. By contrast, Ok-Kyung Pak describes pragmatic kinship ties welcoming horizontal links and circumstantial connections where the proximity of neighborhood, the habits of cohabitation and the ties of cooperation are essential factors inscribed in the territory and the life of the village (hence the term “village kin”). The juxtaposition of two kinship systems, *kwendang* and patrilineal clans, does not appear to be a source of conflict. And the adoption of an ideology of male superiority in spite of (or because of) a matriarchal orientation in the governance of the community is

not that unusual. It is described by Ok-Kyung Pak, for instance, among the matrilineal Minangkabau people in Sumatra. In any case, the *kwendang* system of Jeju is too anchored in the geographical landscape, too woven in the social fabric, and too involved in the mythical universe to be a make-shift affair

My own impression is that while it would have been inconceivable for the Korean Confucian scholars to suspect that the failure of the continental project was due less to the aridity of the soil than to the fortitude of the islanders, we could envision that the solidity of the old culture carried by the women, and the courage they derived from their collective solidarity had something to do with their survival.

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