

Seawomen

The Last Mermaids
by Zena Holloway



Jeju Island is home to an extraordinary community of women who harvest food and riches from the ocean floor, a tradition that can be traced back to the 17th century. They are the *haenyeo*, or the 'sea women' of South Korea. They venture into the waters of the Korea Strait, swimming down to 20 metres without any breathing equipment, braving the dangers of free diving, as they scour the seabed for abalone, octopus, and other seafood. These women hold their breath for around 2 minutes, withstand intense water pressure and frigid temperatures, while struggling to improve their bounty in order to make ends meet.

It is thought that the women of Jeju were originally forced to take to the sea to meet the demands of the greedy Korean king for large quotas of abalone. Fearful of recrimination the tradition of the *haenyeo* was born, and since then their knowledge, customs and skills have been handed down from mother to daughter. There are numerous stories, legends, and songs about their way of life and the unique relationship they have with the sea. Their work is one of the most celebrated traditions of South Korea.

"The *haenyeo* have gone into the water and held their breath, and in exchange they've gotten food for this world, alcohol for their husbands, notebooks and pencils for their children....

The ocean is their lover, their husband, their god." - Koh Hee Young



The *mulsojunggi* as the traditional outfit for divers. The side openings made it easy to put on—even for pregnant women.

They are often referred to as the ‘Korean mermaids’, for some claim that their extraordinary natural underwater ability has evolved through the generations. There is significant evidence to suggest that historical sightings of mermaids were, in fact, sightings of actual diving women, especially those around South Asia. The thesis of Bond & Suffield (2012) explains that many of these mermaid myths are based on women with legs, not fish tails. In ‘The Diving-Woman of Oiso Bay,’ a Japanese tale similar to Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Little Mermaid’, describes a young diving girl who refuses to marry an upper-class samurai because of the differences in their social class. She is portrayed as independent, noble and brave.

In free diving, breath control is a life skill that must be mastered. As the *haenyeo* resurface from their dive, they exhale loudly, making a whistling sound. This is called the *sumbi*, or ‘breath of life’, and is an ancient technique to expel carbon dioxide from their lungs, so that they can remain underwater for longer periods. Could this be the reason why mermaids were alleged to possess enchanted voices that lured unsuspecting sailors to their deaths?

The *haenyeo* not only harvest the ocean, but also play the role of guardians, protecting the marine environment around Jeju, but sadly they are a dying breed. The patterns they used to work are breaking. Most of the women are over fifty years old, with the oldest in their nineties. Their numbers have seen a steep decline, from more than 14,000 active *haenyeo* in the 1970s to fewer than 4,500 today. Industrialisation has led to the younger generation choosing to try their luck in the cities and the quality of the ocean is deteriorating rapidly. Despite numerous protests, construction of a new naval base continues that will further

damage the island's marine ecology. In an effort to preserve the rich tradition of the *haenyeo* they are now listed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.



A *haenyeo* diving in the old traditional *mulot* garb.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate enough to have photographed many inspirational people who connect intuitively with the water through sport, science, beauty, passion, sound, and innovation, but the story of the *haenyeo* goes beyond where I have been before.

I am inspired by the ideology of these noble diving women who live in harmony with the natural world. They have a unique perspective, seeing the world from above and below, occupying a space between fact and fiction. They are fascinating to me, because of the gendered nature of the tradition, passed down from mother to daughter, as well as their knowledge that relies on a deep understanding of the ocean that can only be learned through direct experience.

These underwater sirens appear wise and humble, mysterious and spiritual. They are a symbol of optimism in a populated world where the wilderness is becoming increasingly difficult to find and the harmony between man and nature is vanishing. The *haenyeo* hang weightless, deep in the ocean, on the threshold of becoming lost in the black water or rising to the surface to return to the real world. Using the human body as a vessel for telling stories, and through the mediums of photography, dance, costume, and narrative, this work explores the unique relationship between the *haenyeo* and the sea, as well as the collective memories

of their ancestors. It weaves a human story that swims against the tide of industrialisation and adds another voice to the global community, which is calling for lasting change to protect our oceans.

