

Abstract

"Farewell, and May You Not Return":

Sea Turtles, Ancestors, and Shamanism among Women Divers in Jeju Island

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Sea turtle is considered a sacred creature among Haenyeos(women divers) in Seongsan area of Jeju island. When they encounter the animal underwater, they pray to it, rejoice at it, present conches as ritual offering, or avoid it from fear. They also provide a brief funeral ritual when the turtle comes ashore dead. This paper explores the ecological and cultural context involved in this age-long reverence of Jeju Haenyeos for sea turtles. In the light of Jeju shamanism, ecology of gathering economy, and ancestor worship practiced by Haenyeos, this study reveals that sea turtle is recognized by Haenyeos being within the category of their 'ancestor'. This perception on sea turtles is based on Jeju myth and shamanism, and is deeply intertwined with Haenyeos' "techniques of the body". The thesis implies that great Haenyeo is a great 'person', who has excellent technical skills and ecological information for collecting shells and sea weed underwater, as well as superb magico-religious techniques and sociality to interact with a wide range of real and symbolic "others" including their ancestors and colleagues. The findings of this research pose an intriguing question about the scope of 'ancestor' in Korean shamanism, sanctity of animal in Korean folklore, and the relation between ecology and religion in general.

keywords : Sea turtle, Haenyeo(women divers of jeju), Ancestor, Jeju Shamanism, Techniques of the body, ecology and religion.

Student Number : 2014-20225