

Study on the Culture of Japanese “Ama Divers”

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The Japanese “Ama Divers” are a group of women who have been fishing for seafood in the traditional way and have existed along the coastline for centuries. With their backs to the sky, they search for marine resources in an extremely primitive way, demonstrating the bravery and simplicity of the women. The article explores the origins, current situation, and culture of the “Ama Divers”. After a long period of training and honing, the “Ama Divers” dive deep into the seabed without fear of hardship. This ancient professional culture is not only a part of Japanese history, but also an exploration of the balance between human civilisation and the natural environment. By exploring the “Ama Divers” and their culture, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of the existence of this culture.

Keywords: Japan, “Ama Divers” culture, sea civilisation

Introduction

“Ama Divers” were initially created to dive to the bottom of the sea to collect seafood. The term “Ama Divers” refers to women who are engaged in seafood fishing. The customs, beliefs, activities, and festivals, derived from this occupation, have created a unique culture of the women of the sea, which is still passed down in Japan to this day. The traditional fishing methods of the women, who float between the waves with a leather ring on their backs and work in the waves all year round, have gradually declined, but they have contributed to the diversity and uniqueness of Japan’s culture. Today in Japan, the number of women in the sea is decreasing. With the development and progress of the times, there are many challenges and threats to the profession. It is of great practical significance for the inheritance and development of the culture of “Ama Divers” to be more respected and cherished.

The “Ama Divers”

There is an account of “Ama Divers” in the *Wei Zhi Japanese Biography* of 268 BC. At that time, there was no definite conclusion as to whether “Ama Divers” referred to a male or a female (Kogure, 2009. p. 119). However, in the books *Ancient Chronicles* and *Japanese Clerks*, which were written in the eighth century, there are descriptions of female divers; it is clear that the term refers to female divers (Saito, 2016, p. 165). It is clear from these descriptions that they refer to female divers. On the other hand, we know that in the Edo period, there is an account of “Ama Divers” being a woman. We know that in the Edo period, “Ama Divers” existed as a profession. The history of the culture of “Ama Divers” can be traced back to the discovery of tools and abalone shells in the Jomon period (14,000 BC-300 BC). In addition, there are literary works and other works of art that

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have been handed down with the theme of the “Ama Divers” (Linda, 2022, p. 75). Why is the name “Ama Divers” used? In the old days, when Japanese couples set up boats to go out to sea, women were more buoyant because they had more fat and could stay in the sea longer, so women were often chosen to dive in the sea, while men stayed on the boat to observe and save the day. In the beginning, the “Ama Divers” in Japanese history dived completely naked because of the efficiency of diving operations. It is said that it was easier to dive in the nude in order to prevent the increase of resistance due to the increase of moisture in the clothing, and that it was easier to dive in the nude in order to make light and flexible movements. The reason why the nautical women gradually put on clothing after that is not only the insulation effect and prevention of abrasions, but also the increase in the number of tourists.

In Japan, the study of “Ama Divers” began with folklore studies in the 1930s. Since then, there have been studies on “Ama Divers” in the fields of history, economic geography, and health care (Kogure, 2009, p. 119). According to research, it was in the Edo period that “Ama Divers” were given a social status, and since then they have continued as a traditional occupation. In Japan, there are three types of women, the first of which is called “Dajiren”, and they mainly work in the deep sea. They work at depths of 7 m to 16 m, and when they have difficulty breathing and can no longer work in the deep sea, they have a lifeline tied to their bodies, which is used to allow the people on board to assist them in getting to shore. The work of those who work on the boat is just as important as that of the “Ama Divers”, and those who work on the boat have to take into account the currents and other conditions, and therefore they have to put in the same amount of labour. The second type is called “Zhongjiren”, and they work on the bottom of the sea at a depth of about 4-6 m. The third type is called “Xiaojiren”, and they work at a depth of 2-4 m. The “Ama Divers” work with buckets tied around their waists to prevent them from being washed away during the dive (Nukata & Tsubaki, 1962, p. 184).

Current Status of “Ama Divers” and Measures for Their Protection

Since 1931, the 6th year of the Showa period, the number of “Ama Divers” in Japan has been declining gradually. Nowadays, there are less than 2,000 “Ama Divers” in Japan. After the Second World War, the number of “Ama Divers” has been decreasing. According to a survey conducted by the Japan Sea Museum, in 2010, there were 2,174 “Ama Divers” in Japan, while in 1931, there were 12,426 “Ama Divers”. In 1956, the number of “Ama Divers” in Japan was 17,611, according to the data released by Toho University, and the number of “Ama Divers” in 2010 was about one-eighth of the number in 1956, so the number of “Ama Divers” in Japan is decreasing. In Japan, the number of “Ama Divers” is declining.

In Japan, some people are making efforts to preserve and hand down the cultural heritage, but they are still facing many difficulties. How to solve these difficulties? On the one hand, the development of the “Ama Divers” occupation can be promoted through technological innovation. Modern technology can make the profession safer, more efficient, and more convenient. For example, drones or other technologies can be used to conduct ecological surveys of the marine environment to protect the marine environment and improve the stability of the marine ecosystem. At the same time, the use of advanced diving equipment can also improve fishing efficiency and reduce risks, which can also make more young women willing to join the profession. On the other hand, relevant policies can also be formulated to support the inheritance and development of the occupation of “Ama Divers”. The government can encourage young women to take up the occupation of “Ama Divers” by providing subsidies and incentives. At the same time, it can strengthen the governance and protection of the marine environment, thereby enhancing the health of the marine ecosystem. The government can also formulate some insurance

policies to safeguard their safety and welfare. Finally, society can also promote the culture of “Ama Divers” through cultural heritage and education. For example, publicity and education on the culture of “Ama Divers” can be strengthened in school education to encourage young people to understand and respect this traditional culture; social organisations and volunteers can initiate some activities to protect the marine environment and support the occupation of “Ama Divers”, to promote the inheritance and development of the culture.

Reasons for the Decrease in the Number of “Ama Divers”

With the evolution of history, there are fewer people who consider “Ama Divers” as a purely professional occupation, and instead, there are more tourism “Ama Divers” and model “Ama Divers”. In Japan, the culture of “Ama Divers” is an intangible cultural heritage, and it is an important reason for the promotion of the tourism industry, which led to the birth of the tourist “Ama Divers”. In addition, there are also model “Ama Divers” who do nude photo shoots. On the other hand, the evolution of the “Ama Divers” is also an indication of the demise of the traditional “Ama Divers”. This was not due to the will of the “Ama Divers”, but rather to changes in the social environment; in the 1960s, Japan’s economy grew rapidly, and the industrial structure shifted from the primary to the secondary and tertiary sectors, and the increase in national income led to a shift in income and consumption to domestic tourism, which was the fundamental reason for the change in the social environment (Kogure, 2009, p. 133). In the Izu area, for example, the opening of the express train in 1961 made it possible for people to travel to and from Tokyo in less than three hours. As a result, the area has changed a lot, and Tokyo-based resort hotels moved into the area. By 2000, 69% of the population “Ama Divers” were engaged in the tertiary sector, including lodging, while 3.9% were engaged in agriculture and 2.6% in fishing. In the 1940s, there were about 250 “Ama Divers” in the area, but in 2000, there were only five.

In addition to the underlying cause of the social environment, there are four major reasons for the decline in the number of “Ama Divers”, the first being the ageing age structure, the second being the development and advancement of the times, the third being the development of modern fishing technology, and the fourth being the changes in the ecological environment. Firstly, the ageing population structure is the main reason for the disappearance of “Ama Divers”. The problem of population aging is more serious in Japan than in other developed countries. According to statistics released by the Japanese government, the number of people over the age of 65 has exceeded 28% in 2019, and it is expected to reach 38% by 2040. This also means that fewer and fewer women are willing to take up careers as “Ama Divers”, which are more physically active. Secondly, with the development of the times, the traditional methods have failed to keep up with the needs of the people. Nowadays, unlike in the past, women have more opportunities to choose their careers, and the occupation of seafaring women has gradually become a kind of history and culture, the lack of successors has made it impossible to pass on the profession, and as a result the number of “Ama Divers” has decreased. Nowadays, a large portion of Japan’s “Ama Divers” have been transformed into performance-oriented “Ama Divers” and are no longer purely professional.

The advancement of modern fishing technology is also one of the main reasons for the disappearance of the “Ama Divers”. The fishing industry has undergone a series of major changes over the past few decades, and the use of advanced fishing techniques has become the norm. Traditional fishing techniques have not been able to compete with modern technology, which is more efficient, safer, and cheaper, and this has led to the disappearance of “Ama Divers” fishing. For the new generation of young Japanese, the traditional career of a Ama Diver is not an attractive option, as it requires a lot of time and effort, and is less rewarding. Lastly,

ecological changes are also a major reason for this. The career of Ama Diver is greatly affected by natural factors; the harvests they make from the sea also affect the income of the “Ama Divers”. In the past few decades, with the development of industrialisation and urbanisation, marine pollution has become more and more serious, which threatens the marine biological system and diversity, and indirectly contributes to the decline in the quality of marine products. At the same time, environmental pollution has also affected the sustainability. This has challenged the traditional occupation of “Ama Divers”. The disappearance of fishing grounds, the deterioration of the natural environment, and the low price of seafood are some of the factors that have led to a crisis in the profession of seafarers. For example, abalone has the highest value among the fisheries of the “Ama Divers”. The overfishing of marine resources in the 1970s and the rise in sea temperatures have led to a decline in the quantity of fish products, especially abalone, which has greatly affected the career development of “Ama Divers” (Zhao, 2021, p. 161).

Influence of the “Ama Divers” Culture

Traditions have not been extinguished, but conceptually reorganised. First of all, in Japan, there are many cultural works related to the “Ama Divers”, such as novels, films, TV, among which the more famous ones are *The “Ama Divers”* and *The Voice of the “Ama Divers”*. The culture of the “Ama Divers” is also one of Japan’s most important cultural assets. The culture of “Ama Divers” is also a cultural card of Japan, which attracts many tourists to watch the performance of “Ama Divers”. The culture of the “Ama Divers” also represents the Japanese people’s reverence for nature and respect for life, and is an important part of Japanese culture. Secondly, the “Ama Divers” are very skilled in diving, they can stay in the water for a long time without using any breathing apparatus, and find all kinds of agricultural products in the ocean with their rich experience and sharp senses. Moreover, the culture of the “Ama Divers” has also had a profound influence on the gender concept and the status of women in Japanese society. In traditional Japanese society, women are often regarded as weak and subordinate, but in the culture of the “Ama Divers”, women are a very important role, and women and men enjoy the same treatment and power, and women have gained social status and respect through their own labour, which has an important significance for the improvement of women’s social status and self-worth. It is of great significance to improve women’s social status and self-worth. Last but not least, the culture of the “Ama Divers” had a profound impact on the food culture of Japan. With their labour and skills, the women caught various kinds of seafood, the most famous of which were seaweed and shellfish. Seaweed plays an important role in the Japanese diet and is an important ingredient in many traditional Japanese dishes, such as sushi and cold seaweed. All in all, the culture of “Ama Divers” is a unique and magical traditional cultural phenomenon. With their hard work and wisdom, they have created a way of life and a cultural form that is in harmony with nature, which is an important revelation and reference value for the modern society.

Conclusion

The evolution of the “Ama Divers” from a profession to a culture has taken place over time. For the Japanese people, the culture of the “Ama Divers” has become a part of their traditional culture. Not only is it a traditional occupation, but it is also a unique culture that has been developed by the women over time. In Japanese society, the culture of “Ama Divers” is now a unique calling card, representing a testimony to the harmonious development of man and nature. What flows from the “Ama Divers” is mankind’s awe and reverence for nature. Through this culture, we can also better understand and respect nature.

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