Legend of the Woman Diver
by Steve McCarty


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This paper renders the ancient folktale "Ama" into English, investigates its origins and attempts to interpret its timeless significance. From a prehistoric oral tradition it evolved into the temple chronicle of Shidoji in Kagawa Prefecture and a Noh play with its setting there. In modern times the ama are women who dive for pearls and the like, but from earliest times men and women dove for seaweed, fish and so forth. [1] The story thus becomes "The Woman Diver" 「海女」 with the division of labor, whereas the title was originally 「海人」 or simply "The Diver," who was in any case a woman. The following translation is based on the Noh script [2], Kagawa folktales [3] and legends [4], but the central motifs remain perenially the same: the woman makes the ultimate sacrifice for her husband, to raise the future status of her son.

The Woman Diver

About 1,300 years ago, a very handsome young man sailed over from Nara to the small seaside village of Shido. Nobody knew who he was or what he was there for. However, the young man fell in love with a lovely girl in the village. She was a humble seaweed diver like many other in that area. Soon they married and had a pretty baby boy, whom they named Fusazaki after a place name in the vicinity. They should have been as happy as anyone, but the husband was often seen brooding over something, to the great apprehension of his loving wife. One day she said to him,

"Please tell me, my darling, what makes you so sad?"

"Nothing, my love."
"Nothing? Oh my darling, I do see you have something on your mind. Please tell me what it is if you really love me," said the wife with tears in her eyes.

Then the husband told her the following story, revealing his noble origins and what had brought him to this hamlet so far from his home in the Capital: The young man was Tankai [Fuhito], son of the late Fujiwara Kamatari, a most distinguished aristocratic statesman of the central government. Tankai's younger sister, who was married to the Emperor of the T'ang Dynasty in China, had sent forth three very precious things as her offerings to the Fujiwara family on the occasion of a grand memorial service for the deceased patriarch Kamatari. One of the gifts was a magic drum which, once beaten, never ceased emitting a most exquisite sound until it was covered with nine layers of silken robes. Another was a unique inkstone which if rubbed with an inkstick, could produce the finest ink without applying a drop of water to the stone. The last was a crystal ball enshrining an image of the Buddha who never failed to face you at whichever angle you looked into the ball. These three things of rarity were meant to gratify the departed soul.

But while the ship was sailing through the Inland Sea off the coast of Shido, a Dragon King got wind of the treasures and wanted them. He at once sent out a tremendous thunderstorm as well as legions of dragons against the small vessel. The men fought bravely, but to avoid losing everything they were forced to give up the Ball of Buddha to appease the dragons.

The memorial service for his father was a magnificent one; the two offerings from his sister the Empress of China were immensely admired. But Tankai could not forget the last one - it was the treasure of treasures. Thus he sailed over to Shikoku and came upon the coast closest to the sea-battle, but he could find no way to retrieve the crystal ball from the dragons. The nobleman heaved a deep sigh when he finished his long story.

But the woman said, "I am a diver. I could bring it back to you, my lord."

"Oh, could you?... But what if?..."

"Let me try my best if it may please you. But ..."

Turning her tearful eyes to her baby son, she added,

"If I could bring it back to you, then could you make this son of ours, Fusazaki, your heir?"
Tankai consented without hesitation, assuring her that the boy would have a brilliant future as his heir.

The very next day they sailed out into the sea. The woman put a long lifeline around her waist and said, "Hold the end of this line, will you? Haul me up when I pull on it. That means I've got it." Her husband nodded, gripping the end of the line. Then, with a knife in her hand, she quietly disappeared into the depths.

Down, down she went, through the cold darkness of the deep. It seemed fathomless. But the love of a devoted mother and wife had made the little woman fearless. On and on she went until she found herself in front of a towering palace ferociously guarded by eight dragons and swarms of crocodiles. For a moment she hesitated, but praying once more for the help of Kannon, she burst into the palace brandishing her knife, dashed to the ball, snatched it and ran, closely pursued by the infuriated sea-monsters.

As they caught up with her at the gate of the palace, she quickly cut herself below the breast, inserted the crystal ball and fell down as if dead. Abhorring blood and death, the dragons fell back, while the woman pulled on the lifeline held by her husband above.

The man hauled and hauled until he had hauled up his wife. But to his horror she was dying, terribly wounded and empty-handed. He held her in his arms, only to hear her last gasp: "...my breast."

There in her breast the husband did find the Ball of Buddha for which he had come to these shores. He left for the Capital with the crystal ball and his son Fusazaki, to fulfil his filial duty and his promise to the poor woman diver. [5]

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The story in its present form takes place in the Nara Period (710-784), featuring the historical individuals named: Fujiwara Kamatari (614-669), his son Fuhito (659-720) called Tankai in the story, and the patriarch's grandson Fusazaki (682-737). There does exist a place named Fusazaki near Shido, and the old stone pagodas and tombstones in a shady corner of Shido Temple are believed to include Fusazaki's memorial to his mother the diver.

However, the story is much older even than the Nara Period, and was gradually embellished over time. According to Takeda Akira [6], President of the Kagawa Folklore Society, the basic story goes back even before Japan was united as the so-called Yamato race. He credits the story to a prehistoric oral tradition of the Senju Minzoku (先住民族) preceding the Yamato Minzoku, specifically the Kaifu (海部)
Minzoku who engaged in diving along coastal areas. There are places named Kaifu around Japan today, the nearest to Shido being about 100 km away on the Pacific coast of Shikoku.

The oral tradition of the Ama then combined with Kannon worship in the Nara Period. The Indian Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva had changed to the female Kwan Yin in Chinese Buddhism because she represented compassion. This most popular of Chinese Bodhisattvas became Kannon Bosatsu in Japan, and the woman diver prays for her protection in the story.

Then a picture of the story appears at Shido Temple in the Kamakura Period (1185-1333). Only in the Muromachi Period (1336-1586) is the story finally committed to writing. The priests of Shido Temple were apparently spurred to put their tradition into writing by the independent appearance of the same story in an early Noh play with its setting in Shido.

The Shido Temple Chronicle (『志度寺縁起』[7]) describes without dramatizing how the diver exchanged her life for the Ball, by the grace of the Kannon worshipped at Shidoji. It also adds that the recovered ball was placed between the eyebrows of the Buddha image at Kōfukuji in Nara. The crystal ball, which represents clairvoyance even in the Western world, was thus placed in the "third eye" of imagination or transcendental wisdom in Indian tradition.

The Noh play adds chanting and dancing in praise of the Buddha, religious trends that started in the previous Kamakura Period. Moreover, the Noh play does not end with the sacrifice of the woman diver's life. Her ghost reappears as the Dragon Lady who attains Buddhahood according to the *Lotus Sūtra* (『法華経』). Such elements are regarded by the editors [8] as secondary to the main theme, which goes back to oral traditions and the *Nihon Shoki* (『日本書紀』), one of the first books written in Japan to compile previous traditions in writing.

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, hope was held out for the first time that women could attain Buddhahood - by first transforming into a man. This scripture, written around the start of the Christian era, was still progressive in medieval Japan. In the cultural anthropology of religion, so-called little traditions are found to co-exist with great traditions like international Buddhism. Thus, while the orthodoxy held out a ray of hope for women to be saved, the folk tradition embedded in the ‘Ama’ story held that the Ball of Buddha, saved by the woman, was to be found in a woman's breast. That is as if to say that the answer or salvation men are seeking is to be found in the heart of a woman, that the love of a devoted wife and mother is Buddhahood itself.
A key element of the ‘Ama’ story is the woman's request that, in return for her life and the ultimate treasure, her son become heir to the aristocrat Fujiwara Fuhito. The historical Fusazaki, grandson of the great statesman Kamatari, did become a government Minister, one of the highest ranks below royalty. In this vertical society, the social distance from the humble seaweed diver of a remote village was vast and unthinkable to bridge in one generation. To catapult her son to such heights was ingeniously virtuous in the East Asian cultural context. For not only was the status gap so wide between Tankai and the nameless woman. Aristocrats could have casual ‘second wives,’ to put it politely. But what made the request such a great one was that Tankai (Fuhito) already had an older son by his aristocratic wife in the Nara capital, as the Shidoji Engi indicates. In the Confucian tradition (儒教的伝統) it is particularly the eldest son who inherits the family mantle and tends the altar to the ancestors to ensure their protection. Yet Tankai readily agreed to the request, placing higher value in properly honoring his departed father with the Ball of Buddha.

There are many versions of the "Ama" story, now often called 「海女の玉取り」 or "The Woman Diver who gets the Ball [from the Dragons]." The Shido History [9] tells the story and even pictures the present location of the crystal ball: an islet temple in Lake Biwa near Kyoto (「竹生島宝厳寺にある面向不背の玉」). Another version also published by the Shido Town Office adds the interpretive subtitle 「房前の出世を願う悲哀」 [10] to make it "The Poor Woman Diver who wishes [her son] Fusazaki to become Eminent." This confirms that the woman was not sacrificing herself for her husband so much as for her son. It could be added that Tankai in turn was sacrificing her out of filial piety to his father. Only the Dragon King behaves selfishly; the protagonists in ‘Ama,’ though faced with value conflicts of the highest order, exemplify East Asian ethical ideals.

Thus the ‘Ama’ story is more than just a folktale of Kagawa along with the more nationally famous "Momotaro" and "Urashima Taro." The Noh play 「海人」did not stem from the Shidoji Engi but rather from oral tradition, the Nihon Shoki and similar tales originating elsewhere in Japan. Because first there was the ubiquity of diving as one of the oldest occupations in this archipelago. Then there were common beliefs about sea dragons and the like to explain seagoing misfortunes and other unknowns. In the ‘Urashima Taro’ story the hero goes to an underwater palace and defies aging until he becomes too curious why and opens a sort of Pandora's Box ...

In other places where the ama were active, similar stories arose. To cite just one example, there is a tale called "The Woman Diver who went to the Dragon Palace" (「竜宮へ行った海女) [11] associated with Ise Shima near the Ise Grand Shrines. However, it has little in common with ‘Ama’ beyond the motif implied in the title. It
probably arose independently due to common beliefs in dragon palaces and the natural symbolism of the diver's trade.

Buddhism, the most consciously psychological of the world's great religions, has generally held that the ultimate truth is to be found within oneself upon reflection. In the "Ama" story as recorded under Buddhist influence in the Muromachi Period Noh drama, the symbolism is acted out all too literally as the crystal ball of Buddha is found within the woman's breast. But going beyond the Lotus Sūtra and reflecting devotional (他力) trends since the Kamakura Period, in the ‘Ama’ story the woman's sacrifice is the ultimate truth and leads to her rebirth as a Buddha. The crystal ball, the means of reflection, is left far behind. Having done her duty to her husband, his ancestors and their son, she is beatified, while Fuhito and Fusazaki merely achieve worldly success. Thus "Ama" seems unparalleled as a woman's story, expressing the quintessential virtues of the Japanese woman.

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引用文献 [References Cited]


概要 [Summary in Japanese]

上記の論文は、「海女」の伝説を研究したものである。有史以前の口承から「志度寺縁起」や「海女」という能ができあがっていく。一方、海に潜る時業が女性にかぎられるようになるにつれ、「海女の玉取り」などという民話も現れてくる。最初にあげた英訳 "The Woman Diver" は、四国新聞社の出版した英文ガイドブック KAGAWA で紹介されたものである。室町時代の謡曲と現代民話ももとに書き改めてはいるが、中心のモチーフは変わるものではない。女は、夫のため、究極的には、わが子の出世のために、自分を犠牲にする。

物語は、奈良時代にさかのぼる。父藤原鎌足の霊を弔うため、不比等（淡海）は竜に奪われた面向不背の玉という唐渡りの宝を取りもどしに志度へ渡る。そこでねんごめになった海女は、息子の房前を不比等が正妻の産んだ第一子を差し置き、藤原家の後継ぎにするという条件で竜宮へとくだり、玉を取り戻す。女はその血潮で竜や鰐を撃退しようと、胸下を切って玉を入れ脱
出するが、結局は、命を落とす。不比等は、房前を連れて南都奈良へ戻り、
玉を興福寺釈迦の眉間に奉納する。約束のとおり、衰れ海の女の子の房前
も出世する。
藤原鎌足には現実に房前（682-737）という孫がいた。志度町の近くには房前
という地名も残っている。志度寺にある古い石塔と墓石は、成人して戻った
房前が母の供養のために建てたものと信じられ、宗教的伝説も発生する。
しかし、物語の骨子は、奈良時代以前にさかのぼると思われる。香川県民俗
学会会長の武田明氏によると、いわゆる大和民族が集合する以前にも、海部
（「かいふ」[「あま」という読みもある]）という先住民族がいて、海岸の
近くに住み、当然海に潜ってもいた。海部という地名も各地に残る。志度の
近くでは、徳島県の太平洋岸に一つある。
奈良時代には、仏教に伴う観音信仰がその口承伝説に結びつく。鎌倉時代に
は、志度寺で、海女の玉取りが絵巻物となる。室町時代には、初めて物語の
形ができあがる。また、古い謡曲の「海女」が志度に舞台を設定する。それ
を読んだ志度寺の僧が地元の伝説を「志度寺縁起」へと仕上げていく。
『法華経』信仰に影響された謡曲では、海人の靈が成仏し、亀女となる。1
世紀に書かれた『法華経』では、女の仏果への可能性は、まず男に変形する
ことが条件であった。宗教的伝説の "Little tradition"（傍流）と分かれるが、こ
の区分を適用すれば、主流派が女人にも救済の手を差し伸べたとき、「海
人」という形で現れた民間話の側では、女人の手により取り戻された「仏
の玉」が、その女人の乳房の中に見出されるという趣向をとる。また、
男子の探し求めめる救済が、女人の胸中にこそ存在し、夫を思う妻、子を思う
母の愛こそ仏の慈愛にほかならぬと言わんばかりである。
更に、儒教的伝統を考察すれば、藤原家の後継にされるというのが、この
物語を解明する鍵であると思われる。伝統的日本のいわゆる縦社会の中で
は、貧しい海女の身分と不比等の身分とのあいだには、何の橋がかりもなか
った。しかし、房前の身分は母の犠牲により驚異的に上昇する。東洋人に
は、海女の自殺行為が完全に有徳で独創的と解釈される所以である。不比等
の側でもまた、第一子を後継とする社会制度よりも父の供養に「仏の玉」
を取りもどすほうがを優先し、海女の依頼を躊躇なく承諾している。
『志度風土記』では、「房前の出世を願う哀れ[な]海女の玉取り」という表
題でこの点を明確にしている。つまり、この女は夫のためというよりは、む
しろ、子のために命を捨てる。その夫もまた、父への孝養のため、妻を犠牲にする。自己本体に行動するのは、竜王だけである。すなわち、「海人」の主人公二人は、いずれの徳に最高の価値を付与するかに迷ったとはいえ、結局は、東アジア的道徳律の理想像を演じて見せることになる。

仏教において、究極的真実は、心理学的には反省で内省による観照をとおして、自己の中に見出されるものとされている。室町時代の仏教に影響された能においては、海女の捨身の行為は、誠実の極致とされ、それ故に、女は仏の世界に生まれ変わっている。その時点では、水晶の玉も、己を映す道具にすぎぬとして、顧みられることもない。夫とその先祖、二人の間になした子への務めを果たしきることで、女は祝福され、成仏するが、後に残った夫と子は、精々現世での栄達を享受するにすぎない。以上のような次第で、「海人」は日本女性の最高の徳を語り、女性を主人公とする物語の中でも无数のものと思われる。