

Witness with Your Own Eyes
Ama of Toba-Shima

Sea-Folk Museum Edition



Introduction

Ama are women fishers whose job is to catch abalone and turban snails by breath-hold diving; no other women practice this style of fishing.

Large numbers of abalone shells and *awabiokoshi* (abalone tools) made of deer antler, discovered in the ruins of Shirahama (Uramura Town, Shima), have been dated as 3,000 years old. These fragments suggest *ama* existed here since that time. Moreover, *ama* appeared in the Manyoushuu (early book of poetry) and other early historical records. Thus, *ama* have been active on the Ise Peninsula for thousands of years. They continue to protect their fishing traditions today.

Why did this ancient fishing method, which requires physical skill and knowledge, persist so long into the era of modern technology?

Ama dive one breath at a time until they reach their limit, known as a '50-second battle'. They repeat these dives in cold water, a hard job. Once back on land, however, they become happy, carefree characters. Laughing voices can always be heard in the *ama goya* (hut) where *ama* warm their tired, cold bodies.

Ama appreciate the bounty of nature while they dive. They are tough and lively women who rely on the sea for their livelihood. Furthermore, they have kept their promise faithfully to protect the natural resources of the sea, such as *sazae* (turban snails), *awabi* (abalone) and seaweed. Moreover, *ama* have been ocean defenders, as suggested by this folk song, "If you wait for three years, *awabi* will be become a cute bride."

Ama are a very important part of the life of Shima Peninsula. At the same time, the living '*ama* culture' supports a rich daily life, celebrations for auspicious occasions and festivals.

In recent years, there are concerns about the aging population of *ama* and the lack of successors. How long can *ama* culture and traditions continue? This book illustrates the work of *ama*: their tools, customs, manners and catch, as well as their history and literary art, to describe everything about *ama* for your understanding.

I hope you will gain a great appreciation of '*ama*' – important cultural treasures of Japan. May they continue to be well.



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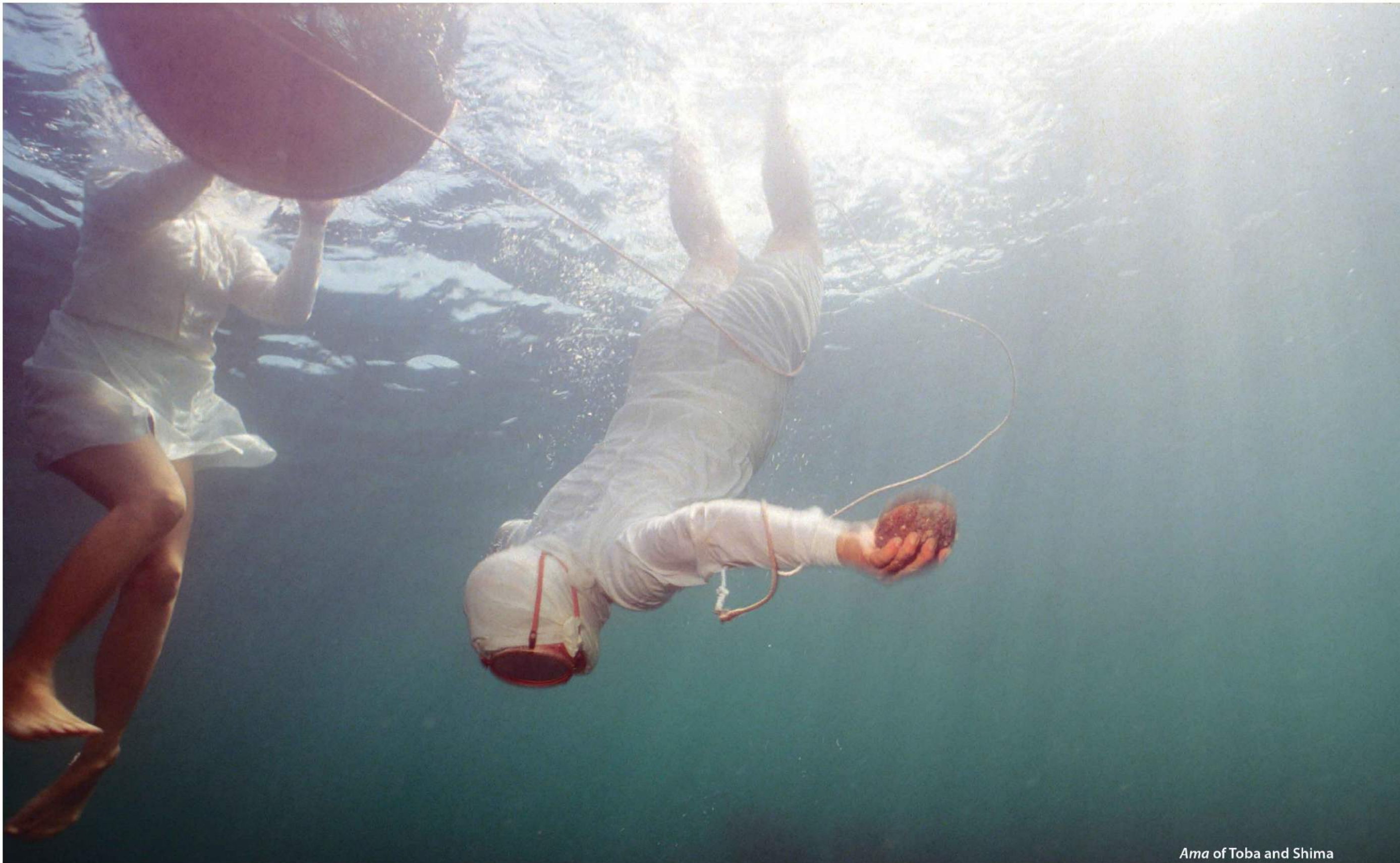
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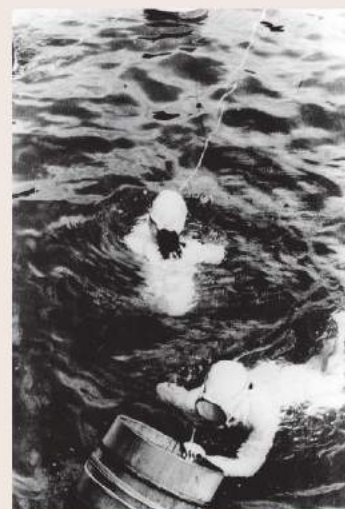
Ama of Toba and Shima

‘Ama’ means ‘female breath hold divers who gather sea creatures for their livelihood’. Why is this woman’s work?

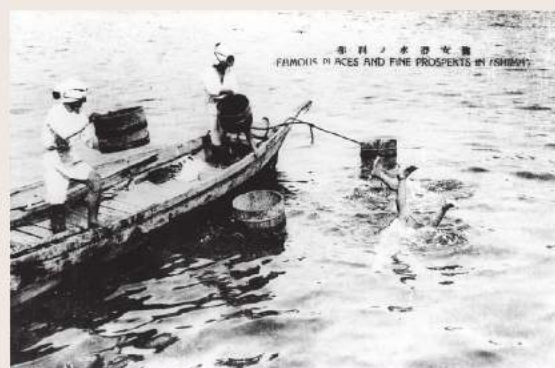
Ama of Toba and Shima

Ama employ simple fishing methods that are nature friendly.
How long have *ama* been in existence?

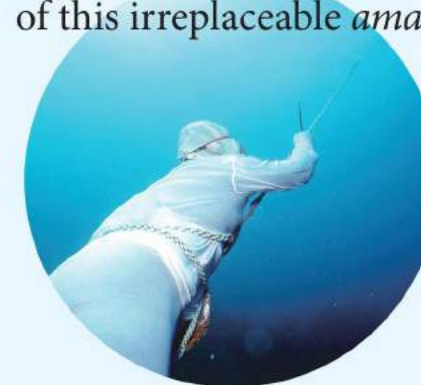




At the beginning of the Showa period (1925) *ama* became icons of tourism and received great attention. Hence, many postcards were produced with images of *ama*.



The fishing methods nurtured by *ama*, and their related folk customs, are proud products of Japan. Let's unravel the mystery of this irreplaceable *ama* culture.



As the Showa Period ended and the Heisei Period began (DATE?), the *ama* of the past turned into modern *ama*. However, they still practice old customs and can be viewed in traditional village scenes.



An Illustrated Description of *Ama* Work

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Ama work consists of diving into the sea to catch ocean treasure, such as abalone, other snails and seaweed. Their fishing methods evolved over time from a struggle with nature, to a refined method of coexistence imbued with knowledge. Let's take a look at *ama* at work and their tools.



1 Ama Work

Annual fishing days for abalone and turban snails occur in the summer for approximately 10-40 days in the Toba region and 60-120 days in the Shima region. Some harvest brown seaweeds such as *arame*, *hijiki* and *wakame*. Sea cucumbers are harvested in winter. Most villages work in two 60-minute diving sessions per day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Preparation:

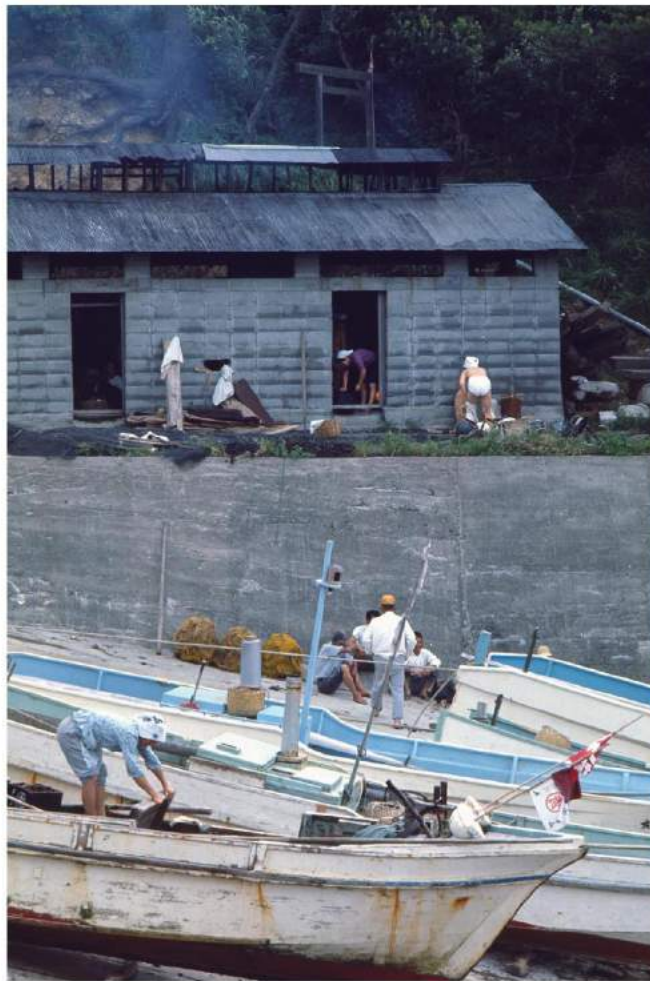
Ama are truly hard working people. They make breakfast for their family, send their children to school, take care of the farm work, and then go to sea. Before diving, *ama* take time to inspect their diving gear carefully, such as their wetsuit and mask.



Ama mending the *sukari* (net) that holds her catch.



Transporting dive gear in a wheelbarrow.

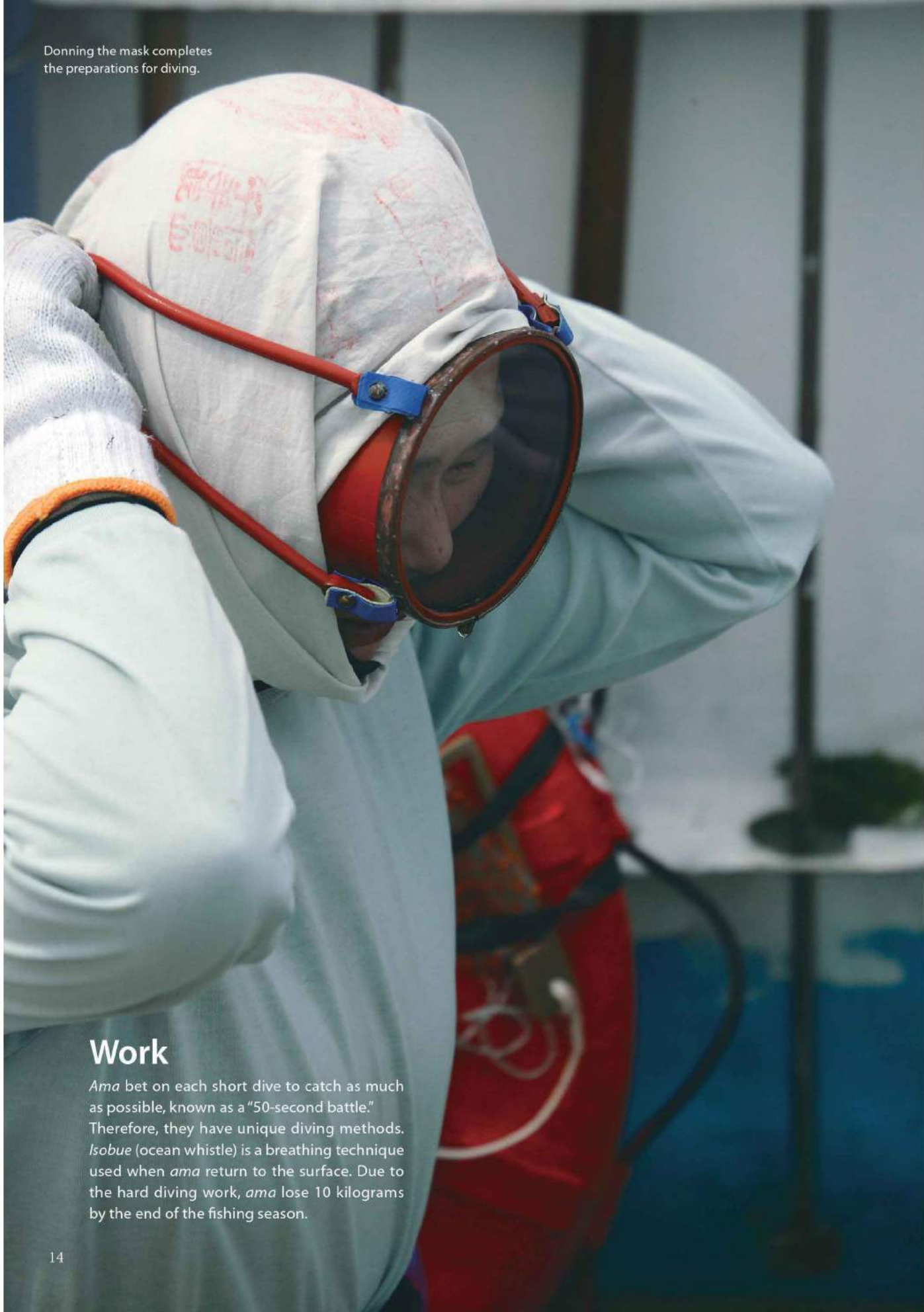


Ama goya (hut) near the fishing port.



On the way to their ocean fishing site.

Donning the mask completes the preparations for diving.



Work

Ama bet on each short dive to catch as much as possible, known as a "50-second battle." Therefore, they have unique diving methods. *Isobue* (ocean whistle) is a breathing technique used when *ama* return to the surface. Due to the hard diving work, *ama* lose 10 kilograms by the end of the fishing season.



Ama start their dives from the *isooke* (wooden bucket).



Ama use the *isobue* breathing technique to prepare for each dive.



Ama find abalone at the bottom of the sea.

Bringing the Catch to Market

Ama take their catch directly from the water to their association's market on the beach.

Awabi (abalone), sazae (top snails), seaweeds, etc. are separated by kind, weighed and sold at auction.

It is an exciting time to know how much money they will make from today's work, but at the same time, they are nervous.



Ama take today's catch to market.

Placing the catch in the holding tank at the market.



Ama sorting her catch by kind.



Weighing the catch.



Wetsuits hung up to dry.

Break Time in the *Ama Goya* (Ama Hut)

After *ama* take their catch to market, they wash the salt off of their tools and *isogi* (white outfit). Nothing compares to this time in the *ama goya*, a time for fun and relaxation. *Ama* brag about their kids and make fun of their husbands. Their laughing voices never stop.

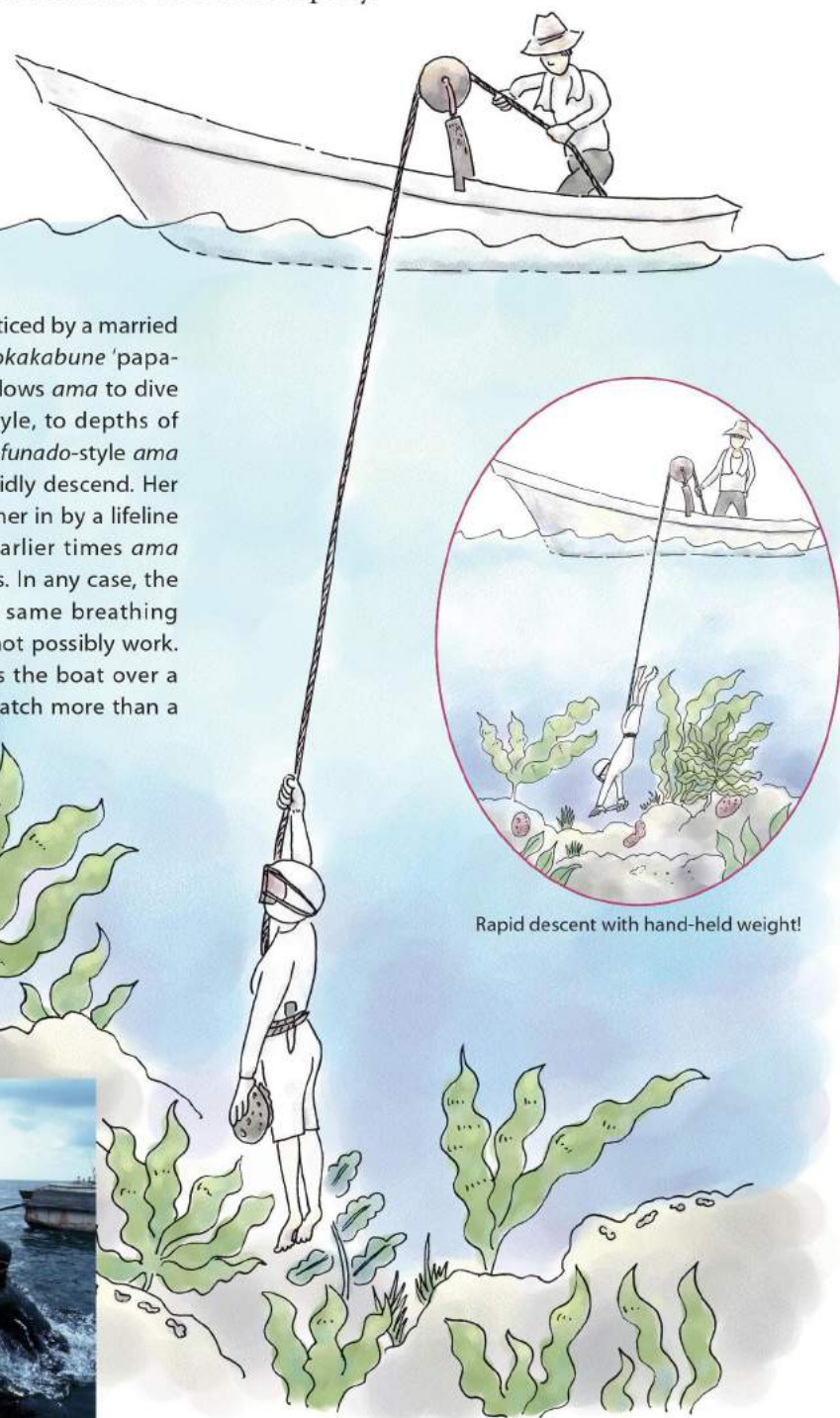


2 Funado and Kachido

The *ama* of Shima Peninsula use two styles of diving: *Funado* and *Kachido*. One type of *kachido* swims from shore to the fishing site. The other style is to go to the fishing site by boat, together as a group. In recent years, *funado* divers have decreased rapidly.

Funado Style

This method is typically practiced by a married couple. It is also called *totokakabune* 'papa-mama boat'. This method allows *ama* to dive deeper than the *kachido* style, to depths of 10-20 meters (33-50 feet). A *funado*-style *ama* holds a heavy weight to rapidly descend. Her husband, on the boat, reels her in by a lifeline tied around her waist. In earlier times *ama* were pulled in by long poles. In any case, the couple must maintain 'the same breathing rhythm' or this method cannot possibly work. Because the husband keeps the boat over a good fishing area, she can catch more than a *kachido*-style *ama*.



Rapid descent with hand-held weight!

● **Isoguruma** (Pulley)
A pulley reels in the lifeline.

● **Inochizuna** (Lifeline)
The name varies by region: *ikizuna*, *hikizuna*, *chinawa*. Only *funado ama* use this tool, with pulley. When suffering, the *ama* signals with the line and is pulled up by it; it is literally a lifeline.



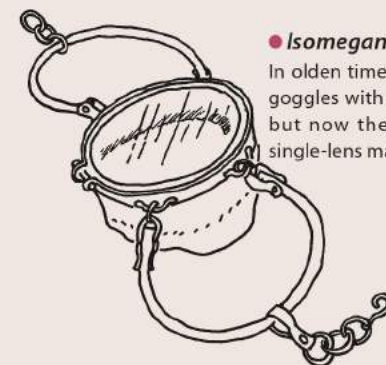
Stone weight

Lead weight

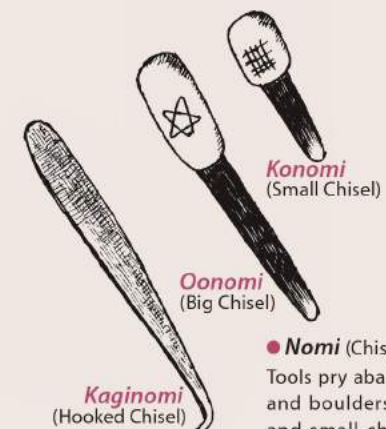
● **Omori** (Weights)
The average *ama* dive lasts for 50 seconds. It is a time of struggle. Weights are used to reach the sea floor 'a second earlier'. Historically, weights were made of stone with a carved hole, called *kuriikari* and *kuriishi*. Later, lead weights were used of about 15 kilograms.

● **Hikizao** (Pulling Pole)

Bamboo poles of 4.5-6 meters (15-20 feet) were placed in front of the *ama* at the mid-point of her ascent and pulled her into the boat. Cloth wrapped around the end of the pole prevented slipping - an accident that might delay pulling in the *ama*. Practiced until circa 1960 in the towns of Ijika and Sugashima, Toba City. These poles were called *isozawa* in Ijika, and *hikizawa* in Sugashima.



● **Isomegane** (Goggles)
In olden times *ama* used goggles with two lenses, but now they all use a single-lens mask.



Konomi
(Small Chisel)

Oonomi
(Big Chisel)

Kaginomi
(Hooked Chisel)

● **Nomi** (Chisels)
Tools pry abalone from rocks and boulders. Large chisels and small chisels are used, depending on location and size of the abalone. Hooked chisels are broadly used because they can handle lobsters and sea urchins, as well as abalone.



Tebukuro
(Gloves)



Yubibukuro
(Finger Sacks)

● **Tebukuro, Yubibukuro** (Gloves, Finger Sacks)
Gloves protect hands from abrasion and sharp objects, and prevent slippage on the sea floor. Special 'finger sacks' are worn to harvest *tengusa*, a red seaweed gathered by finger tips.