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 *awabi kōshi* (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 Manyōshū (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 seazae (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 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.
‘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?
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.

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

As the Showa Period ended and the Heisei Period began (DATE), the amas of the past turned into modern amas. However, they still practice old customs and can be viewed in traditional village scenes.
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
2 Diving Styles: Funado and Kachido
3 Ama Tools and Clothing
4 Ama’s Catch
5 Abalone (Awabi) Fishing Regulations
6 Ama of Toba and Shima: Statistics
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.
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. Irobu (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 use the irobu breathing technique to prepare for each dive.

Ama find abalone at the bottom of the sea.

Ama start their dives from the isoke (wooden bucket).
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.
Break Time in the *Ama Goya* (*Ama* Hut)

After *ama* take their catch to market, they wash the salt off of their tools and *ikoki* (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.
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 totokakubure ‘papama-mama boat’. This method allows ama to dive deeper than the kachido style, to depths of 10-20 meters (33-66 feet). A funado-style ama holds a heavy weight to rapidly descend. Her husband, on the boat, reeles 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!