

What are the fishing techniques of ama women divers in Toba and Shima?

The Mie Prefectural Board of Education conducted research on the fishing customs of *ama* women divers in Toba and Shima between fiscal 2010 and 2013. The research findings show that the fishery of *ama* woman divers in Toba and Shima is unique in the history of long-cherished fishing techniques of female free-divers; the divers' great ability to detect fisheries; the local community's commitment to handing down traditional fishing gear and playing fishing roles divided between men and women; and the relationship that the fishing tradition has maintained with Ise Jingu and the local community since ancient times. In addition, various fishing-related customs have survived well, including the invocation of "tsuiya, tsuiya" chanted by *ama* divers while fishing, and amulets called *seman* and *doman*. Based on these distinctive characteristics, on March 3, 2017, the fishing techniques of *ama* women divers in Toba and Shima were designated as an important intangible folk cultural property by the national government, a first for *ama* woman diver-related customs.

Ama are generally referred to as women who dive professionally into the sea and catch such seafood as shellfish and seaweed. More precisely, they are "fishermen and also women who preserve, transmit, and exemplify their age-old fishing techniques as well as their time-honored daily customs while diving into the sea without any apparatus and catching such seafood as shellfish with simple tools."

History of *ama* fishing



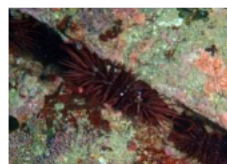
Unearthed relics from the Shirahama Remains

Ancient shells including those of abalone were discovered in the remains of Shirahama in Uramura-cho, Toba city. This finding is thought to indicate the possibility of free diving at that time as abalone can only be caught in the deep sea. A baggage tag used in 745 when local products were sent to the Imperial Court in Nara describes the delivery of abalone to the court from present Nakiri in Daio-cho, Shima city. In addition, poems about *ama* fishing (free-dive fishing by women) are also found in the 8th-century anthology of Japanese poetry (Man'yo-shu) composed by the famous poets Otomo-no-Yakamochi and Yamanoue-no-Okura.

Fish caught by *ama* fishing



Abalone



Sea urchins



Sea cucumbers



Turban shells



Arame, seaweed

Current state of *ama* fishing

Although 978 *ama* women divers were active in Toba and Shima Cities in 2010, research in fiscal 2015 found that the figure as of the end of 2014 was 755.

Ama fishing (in which men as well as women participate) is currently practiced in 27 areas near the two cities, which are blessed with the geographical features of a shore reef and a sea environment rich in seaweed.

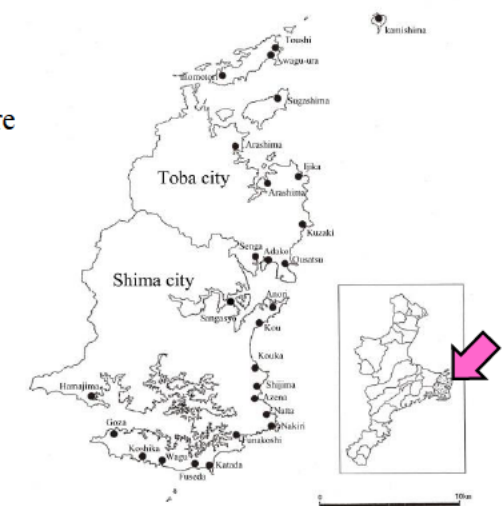
○ Areas where *ama* fishing takes place

Toba city

Kamishima, Toushi, Wagu-ura, Momotori, Sugashima, Arashima, Uramura, Ijika, Kuzaki, Ousatsu, Adako, Senga

Shima city

Sangasyo, Anori, kou, Kouka, Shijima, Azena, Natta, Nakiri, Funakoshi, Katada, Fuseda, Wagu, Koshika, Goza, Hamajima



Areas where *ama* fishing takes place

Tools used in *ama* fishing



goggles

Wearing goggles and wet suits, *ama* collect such shellfish as abalone using a spatula-shaped tool called nomi ("chisel"). There are various sizes of nomi, and some have hooks. *Ama* put what they collect into net bags called tanpo, which are attached to floats. Although the tools used in their fishing in Toba and Shima are nearly the same, women divers arrange their own tools for easy use by curving the chisels or using stainless steel nomi. The photo shows a tool actually used by a woman diver in Sugashima-cho, Toba city.



Tanpo, the net bags which are attached to floats



Wet Suits



Fin



Nomi, chisel



Styles of *Ama*

Method of *ama* dive fishing

Ama employ three methods of fishing near the cities of Toba and Shima.

Kachido: solo fishing after swimming from land.

Noriai (Nose-nose): Several women divers board a boat and fish while mutually checking each other.

Funado: A man and a woman (e.g. married couple, father and daughter) board a boat and fish, with the man onboard providing assistance, such as pulling up nets. This type of fishing is least popular.



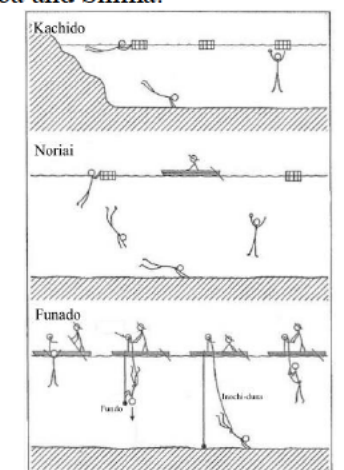
Katido (Shima-cho, Shima city)



Noriai (Shima-cho, Shima city)



Funado (Osatsu-cho, toba city)



Schematic diagram of *ama* fishing method prepared by referring to Jinrui-Seibutsugaku-Nyūmon ("Introduction to Human Biology") by Yukinari Kouhara

Ama fishing techniques as cultural property

Women divers have a good perception about fishing such as good locations for a catch. For example, *ama* judge where to dive by looking at the locations of islands and mountains from the boat, and then read the currents by observing the flow of buoys.

In the sea, *ama* distinguish where they can catch by looking at a flat part of the seabed and the stones piled there. They also see the sizes of shells (including abalone) to preserve the resources. Only *ama* in the sea can judge conditions under the surface. *Ama* undoubtedly have very discerning eyes.

Ama avoid certain phrases and behaviors when they go fishing or are in the sea. They prefer the phrase *Itte-koukai* in Japanese, for example, meaning that they will go and come back. It is also historically said that *ama* preferred to behave in order to have good fortune in their daily life, like using the port (left) side when boarding a boat and entering the sea.

An *ama* hut is a temporal building where women divers rest between fishing dives and warm themselves around a fire after fishing. While sitting around the fire, they enjoy talking about various things ranging from gossip, their earnings, and what they saw when diving to good-catch points and methods of collecting shells. The study by the Mie Prefectural Board of Education revealed that such discussions have resulted in a natural succession of knowledge and techniques regarding *ama* fishing. For *ama*, their hut is a place for exchanging knowledge and techniques, as well as for taking a rest.

Ama also play an important role in passing down traditional events in communities in *ama*-Related festivals in the cities of Toba and Shima.

It is essential that *ama*, as bearers not only of fishing but also cultural property, pass down their traditional culture through their ordinary fishing for daily life without an awareness of their own existence as a cultural property.



Judging the sizes of abalone



Work on the port side of a boat



Taking rest at an ama hut



Notto-Shongatsu (an event at the end of the New Year holidays in Kunisaki-cho, Toba city)

Publicizing the appeal of *ama* fishing!

Mie Prefecture has taken the initiative in protecting cultural properties related to the fishery of *ama* woman divers, and promoting fishery itself and tourism based there on. The traditional fishery of *ama* women divers has gained greater recognition as a set of renewable fishing techniques. Believing that the fishing techniques of *ama* women divers are indispensable for understanding of the history of the lifestyles of fishers not

only in Toba and Shima but also in the rest of Japan, the Mie Prefectural Board of Education designated “Ama techniques, traditional woman-free-diving-fishing in Toba and Shima” as an intangible folk cultural property in January 2014. The national government also designated the fishing techniques of *ama* women divers in Toba and Shima as an important intangible folk cultural property in March 2017. Mie Prefecture will continue its efforts toward the inscription of the fishing techniques of *ama* women divers on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In order to transmit the appeal of *ama* fishing nationwide, the Board held a joint panel exhibition with Ishikawa Prefecture and is actively working at the “National Convention on the Preservation and Promotion of *Ama* (women divers) Culture ” established by eight prefectures in January 2014, promoting information exchange and publicizing the appeal of *ama* fishing, while supporting the continuation of *ama* fishing from the perspectives of preserving cultural property and promoting fishing.



Eikei Suzuki,
Mie Prefectural Governor
at the convention



convention meeting



Discussion by stakeholders,
after National Cultural
Property Designation Report



Grant ceremony
of specified certificate

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Published in February 2015, revised in March 2017.

Important Intangible Cultural Properties

Fishing techniques of *Ama* woman divers in Toba and Shima

国重要無形民俗文化財 鳥羽・志摩の海女漁の技術



The Mie Prefectural Board of Education

三重県教育委員会