

## Ama (Female Diver) (long version)

*Ama* are female divers who harvest a wide variety of seafood from the ocean floor, including abalone, shellfish, and various types of seaweed. *Ama* are found only in Japan and Korea.

In Ise-Shima, where there is rich marine life, their history goes back thousands of years, and tales of early *ama* are recorded in the *Manyōshū*, a poetry collection compiled around 759. Today, Ise-Shima is home to the largest number of *ama* in Japan (973 *ama* as of 2010).

*Ama* do not use any breathing apparatus; instead, they must learn to hold their breath as they dive using special breathing techniques. These include slightly opening their mouths and exhaling slowly when they surface, making a whistling sound known as *isobue*. Most *ama* hold their breath for around a minute, and the time spent underwater is called the “50-second battle.” Early *ama* braved the cold waters wearing nothing but loincloths, but today’s *Ama* wear wetsuits and large single-lens diving masks.

There are two main diving methods used by the *ama*: *kachido* and *funado*. In the *kachido* method, *ama* tie a rope around their waists. This is attached to a wooden bucket that floats on the surface. The *funado* style, on the other hand, is traditionally practiced by a married couple from a boat. The husband waits on the boat while the *ama* dives, holding a heavy weight. This allows the *ama* to descend rapidly and reach deeper levels than *kachido ama*. The husband then reels her in using a pulley system attached to the boat. These methods vary slightly depending on the area.

*Ama* have strict rules to protect their livelihood and conserve marine resources. There are long periods surrounding the spawning season (usually from September to December) when taking abalone is forbidden. Furthermore, abalone can be harvested only once they are over 10.6cm long. They are slow growing, and if the abalone reaches that size, it means it has had the chance to breed at least once. This rule is embodied in the *ama*’s saying “Abalone will become a beautiful bride, as long as you wait three years.”

In addition, all local *ama* must agree unanimously to go diving each day of the diving season. The number of diving days, and the length of each diving session is also strictly regulated by local communities to protect natural resources.

*Ama* have a strong historical connection to Ise Jingu, the most important *jinja* (Shinto shrine) in Japan. It is said that Yamatohime-no-mikoto, the founder of Ise Jingu, was given an abalone by Oben, a local *ama* who lived in Kuzaki, 2,000 years ago. She enjoyed the taste so much that she

decided abalone should be offered to Ise Jingu's deities as an element in their sacred meals, called *shinsen*. These balanced meals for the deities contain thirty types of high quality, locally sourced food. This tradition continues today, and the abalone used is obtained from the Kuzaki area of Toba City. Oben is enshrined at Amakazukime Shrine in Kuzaki, so the abalone caught by *ama* in this area are thought to have received her blessing.

There are many rituals and festivals involving *ama*, including the Shirongo Festival on Sugashima Island. Regulations usually prevent *ama* diving around Shirongo Beach except on this festival day, held in July every year, when visitors can watch *ama* compete to catch abalone. It is considered lucky to find a pair, and the winner is appointed Chief *Ama* for that year. *Ama* also decorate their clothing and equipment with star and lattice shapes. They are called *seiman*, and *doman*, respectively. Embroidered with thread, or drawn with purple ink made from seashells, these traditional symbols are thought to protect the wearer from evil spirits and the fickle nature of the sea.