

## The *Ama* of Ise-Shima

*Ama* are female free divers who harvest a wide variety of sea life from the ocean without the use of breathing apparatus. The tradition exists only in Japan and South Korea, where the word for the divers (*haenyeo* in Korean) means “sea women.” Some scholars have estimated that *ama* have existed for almost 2,000 years, although their appearance in historical records only dates back to the eighth century. There are other coastal areas in Japan where *ama* divers are active, but the largest concentration can be found in Ise-Shima National Park.

Divers are taught by elder *ama* from a young age—sometimes as early as 12—to master diving and breathing techniques, and to recognize different types of marine life. Most of their dives last about a minute, which is spent on a constant hunt for abalone, shellfish, and seaweed, at depths of up to 20 meters. Speed and efficiency are paramount during these dives, which the *ama* call “50-second battles.”

There are two diving methods practiced by *ama*: *kachido* and *funado*. In the *kachido* method, a rope is attached to a net basket that floats on the surface. Divers tie this rope around their waist, and place their catch in the basket. The *funado* method is typically practiced by married couples: the husband waits on a boat while the *ama* makes a quick dive using a weight. When ready, the diver signals her husband on the boat, who reels her in using a pulley.

*Ama* are an essential part of life and culture in Ise-Shima. Although their number has decreased in recent years, facilities like the Toba Sea-Folk Museum aim to preserve their legacy for future generations.