

WAITING FOR THE TIDE, TUNING IN THE WORLD

Traditional Knowledge, Environmental Ethics and Community

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Introduction

“(Underwater) I hear the water coming into my body, I hear the sunlight penetrating the water” . . . “sound of fish, seaweeds, shells, in the water, it is so quiet but so noisy”.
(Ama diver)

The island town of Suga-shima, located in central Japan, holds a small community of female divers known as ‘ama’. *Ama* (literally ‘sea women’) dive for abalone, various seashells and seaweeds throughout the year. The traditional form of diving is still maintained in the coastal areas of Japan, Korea and China, and the current *ama* population in Japan is estimated to be around three thousand.^[1]

This paper explores *ama*’s knowledge, and their sense of connection towards the ocean environment. It is argued that *ama* connectivity articulates a human-nature relationship and alerts us to the changing state of the surroundings both socially and ecologically, thus playing a critical role in the formation of environmental values. Although it is increasingly difficult for *ama* to maintain such connectivity, it is critical that *ama* recover sensitivity to their environment, and promote a sense of community, both conceptual and geographical. For the recovery of *ama* tradition to happen, the concept of ‘soundscape’ is used in this essay to capture the symbiotic relationship between the human and the environment in traditional *ama* practice. Here, the divers’ distinct whistle sound (*isoboue*) combines with the seascape, the women’s narratives, and the community’s life-sounds to create an *ama* soundscape that symbolizes their profound connection with the ocean.

Ama in Suga-shima

Suga-shima is a small island located in Shima Peninsula, south west of Nagoya and facing Ise Bay.^[2] The word *shima* in this region has a particular significance. As well as

shima being the regional name, it also means ‘islands’ and ‘underwater rock faces’, where the harvesting of abalone and other shellfish takes place. The topography in Shima Peninsula is reflected in a large *ama* population, with approximately 1300 *ama* living here. The region is known for its spectacular coast lines scattered around some 300 small islands, both inhabited and uninhabited.^[3] Steep cliffs and coves isolate the region’s villages from each other, many of which are referred to as ‘land islands’ (*rikuno koto*).

Suga-shima is one of the four inhabited islands of Toba City, and currently holds an *ama* population of about 90. Each island is connected to the city by ferry services to Suga-shima, with six return services operating daily. The short 20-minute trip allows many islanders to commute to the city for work and study, shopping, health services and various forms of entertainment. With the highest point at 236 metres, this steep and rocky island has little land available, except for the small harbour where most of the population lives.^[4] There is no agricultural land, except for some small private vegetable gardens. One side of the island is often subject to illegal fishing, which villagers monitor by taking turns to patrol in their small boats. The main means of communication is a loud speaker through which daily announcements and regular clock bells echo throughout the village. Before festival days, frequent announcements are made calling for volunteers for various jobs and giving specific instructions (eg cleaning, cooking, decorating and rehearsing). Crowds gather promptly and jobs are carried out smoothly in an orderly manner.

The twenty *ama* women interviewed for this study were mainly in their late 50s and 60s (the oldest diver was 76), and have worked, or are working, as *ama* in various capacities. Like many rural areas in Japan, the population of Suga-shima and many other villages in the regions is aging.^[5] Interviews, observations and sound recordings were carried out at various locations in the community: at the beach, the port, the fish market, the fishery union office, the community hall, as well as in shops, in shrines, at festival sites, in guest houses, in schools, in the streets, and in ferry terminals.^[6]

Ama and Work

Ama dive 5 to 20 metres deep while holding their breath for one to two minutes. In between dives, they rest only a few minutes. Although *ama* vary from region to region, they are typically divided into two distinct kinds: *funado*, or those *ama* who dive from a boat to a depth up to 20 metres, and typically work with a male boat handler (*tomae*); and *kachido*, divers who swim in from shore and dive to a depth of 5 to 10 metres. Among their harvests, abalone is most prized, fetching up to 8000 *yen* a kilo. In the region, the diving season is typically between June and August, although abalone fishing is officially allowed all year, except during the breeding season (15 September to 31 December). Decisions to ‘open the sea’ are made by each regional fishery union (*ama* division). Decisions are based on not only on the tide and the weather, but also on festivities, rituals and local beliefs, such as the belief when sharks are most likely to be plentiful in the region. The number of days when the sea is opened varies according to the region, but typically lasts 10 to 40 days. Diving time per day is also restricted to 30

minutes to 1.5 hours, and the announcement is made in the morning. Suga-shima has the least number of days (12 in 2004) and their diving time is restricted to one hour.

Japan's first chronology, *Nihonshoki* (c 718), and court attendant Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* (c 967) act as the earliest known documentations of the *ama* being clearly identified as female divers. Little seems to have changed about the women themselves, even with the introduction of new equipment in the 1960s, and it is quite surprising and personally moving to read a chapter in the *Pillow Book*, such as "Times when one should be on one's guard" (c 967, Chapter 285), and share similar sentiment towards these women:

The sea is a frightening thing at the best of times. How much more terrifying must it be for those poor women divers who have to plunge into its depths for their livelihood! One wonders what would happen to them if the cord round their waist were to break. I can imagine men doing this sort of work, but for a woman it must take remarkable courage. (Morris, 1967:248)

Whistling and Soundscape

The whistle is a distinct method of breathing for *ama*, and also acts as a way to rest and prepare for the next dive. The whistle also helps to maximize the number of dives, which could be as many as 50 in an hour. The whistle sometimes sounds like 'painful gasps', as depicted in the *Pillow Book*:

When finally she wants to come up, she gives a tug on her cord and the men haul her out of the water with a speed that I can well understand. Soon she is clinging to the side of the boat, her breath coming in painful gasps. The sight is enough to make even an outsider feel the brine dripping. I can hardly imagine that this is a job that anyone would covet. (Morris, 1967:249)

The sound is more prominent with *funado* divers who dive deeper and longer than *kachido* divers, but there are also regional variations. The regional sound variations of *ama* have been described as *hooi*, *ooi*, *hue*, *ha* or *hou* (Segawa, 1970:146). The whistle sound, and the word itself (*isobue*), are said to be specific to the Shima region, whereas other regions refer to it as a belly breath (*haraiki*) and a fast breath (*hayaiki*). Women said they "feel better with the whistle and this breathing pattern becomes habitual even on land eg working in the fields or running up stairs". In group diving situations, the whistle is also a way of subconsciously identifying and locating each other, providing safety as well as respect for work territories. The whistle sound has been featured in poems, folklore and songs, and is sometimes referred to as *iso nageki* (sea lament) for its sigh-like quality.

In this paper, the *ama* culture is captured through soundscape: the whistle blends with the surrounding seascape of ocean waves and sea breezes, as well as the women's narratives and the community's life-sounds. Soundscape here acts as a symbol of the *ama*'s knowledge, their ethics and their sense of connectivity to the ocean. The

soundscape articulates the human-nature relationship of the *ama*. Soundscape, as Casey suggests:

Helps humans to recognize their place in relation with the surrounding. . . . [They] are perceived and interpreted by human actors who attend to them as a way of making their place in and through the world, and [they] are invested with significance by those whose bodies and lives resonate with them in social time and space. (Casey in Feld, 2003:226)

The sound that “literally grip[s] the entire community by the ears” (Schafer, 1995:89) captures the totality of *ama* culture and gives it a distinct identity to this part of cultural heritage.

Ama as Women

Perhaps the most commonly asked question about *ama* is: why are the *ama* female? Although the diving is not restricted to women, and in other regions many male *ama* exist, in the Suga-shima region, *ama* have remained predominantly women. Recently, male divers have appeared, but they have kept a lower profile than the female *ama*.^[7] Apart from the gender role division of the traditional diving method where men usually handled the boats, it is commonly believed—and many women themselves said—that women are better suited for diving as they “are insulated better”. None of the women, however, looked insulated in any way, and although a number of studies seem to suggest that women’s bodies have a better tolerance and suitability for endurance and cold (eg Ashcroft, 2001), the reason seems to be more social than physical. Traditionally, girls were introduced into the *ama* community, learned to dive, made their own diving shirts, and received a set of diving gear as their wedding gift.

The myth of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu,^[8] and the beginning of the abalone offering also connects women to the diving tradition. The myth describes a deity who is travelling in a region in search of a suitable location to enshrine the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. One day, an *ama* offers an abalone to the deity.^[9] The deity is most impressed by the delicacy of the abalone, and requests that the abalone be made as an offering in the Sun Goddess’ shrine, now Ise Shrine. The tradition of offering is maintained to date (three times a year), in which dried abalone gives the region the title of ‘sacred food source’ and ‘the country of delicacy’.^[10] As also described in Martinez (2004), it is a regional belief that the sacred abalone must be harvested from the region’s most easterly point where the first sunrise is sighted, and some also believe that (although written in different characters) the word *ama* actually relates to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. The myth, therefore, provides historical and cultural contexts to the ocean environment, connecting nature and culture, and illustrating the mutually dependent nature of the conservation of cultural and natural heritage.

Ama Ethics

“It (the wetsuit) was warm but with that on, I could not feel the ocean any more you hear the tide changing” . . . “the ocean disciplines us, it decides everything about our life”. (Ama diver)

Abalone harvesting for *ama* is, of course, a source of income, but it is also clear that they take pride in carrying on the tradition as well as respecting the ocean as a place they have a profound connection with. The numerous rules, rituals, customs, ceremonies and festivities that relate to this practice are not only to ensure safety, but also to pay respect and gratitude to the natural and cultural heritage they that the *ama* care for. More importantly, the *ama* ensure that over-harvesting and depletion of sea resources do not occur. The introduction of diving equipment to *ama* practice, however, did cause overharvesting and depletion of sea-resources.

The timing of the introduction of masks and wetsuits varied from region to region, but in general, masks were introduced in the early 1900s and wetsuits in the 1960s. Maraini (1962) and several photographers such as Segawa (1970) captured on film women diving naked or with white cotton shirts called *isogi*. Before the introduction of the masks, the practice of searching for sea resources was referred to as ‘blind-search’ (*mekura-sagashi*). The introduction of both masks and wetsuits received significant resistance from the *ama* themselves, because with the masks “you see too well”. Some of the *ama* with diving equipment then ended up taking too many sea resources, and also taking too many small ones as the glass magnifies the shells that are meant be no less than 10.6 cm. Even if the *ama* who had taken too many sea resources from the ocean and returned them, “removing [the abalone] from the rock-face still disturbs them”. Many *ama* unions resisted the introduction of wetsuits, and imposed initial “one wetsuit per household” rule and restrictions on season, location and time, which still applies to all region ranging from half-an-hour to one-and-a-half hours.^[11] No diving is allowed during the breeding season in the region (15 September to 31 December). Suga-shima was the last village to introduce both masks (1965) and wetsuits (1988) and has the shortest diving season of 10 to 12 days. One woman said: “with wetsuits you are of course warm but cannot feel the ocean”; and the other “it felt rude to go into the sea with that black thing on”.

One interesting observation is that the male divers’ population increased around the time when wetsuits were introduced. It was also around this time that many many men took city jobs, leaving women to be shore divers rather than boat divers. Because of less of a need for boat handlers, some of the men started to dive. It seems true that wetsuits demystified and neutralized the gendered role of *ama*, and allowed more men to take up diving as well.

With the introduction of wetsuits, however, new kinds of accidents started to occur. There was an accident on the next island a week before our fieldwork where a diver’s “sleeve got caught in the rock”. Women explained that the rubbery material can get jammed in the rough rock surface when you slide your arm into narrow caves and underneath the rock. Another incident was a heart attack. Wetsuits can be deceptive of

the cold temperature of the water, and may cause the *ama* to take risks that they otherwise would not take. They also said that “wetsuits exhaust you without you noticing as you have to swim resisting buoyancy carrying three to four kilograms of weights”. It was also explained that the traditional mulberry waist cord has now been replaced by a plastic cord. The fear expressed in the Pillow Book—where the *ama* fear if the cord should break—is now an opposite fear, where *ama* can now become trapped underwater by the plastic cord.

The introduction of wetsuits also led to an unfortunate increase in illegal fishing by both recreational and commercial divers. This, together with increased use of technology (GPS, transport and storing) and mass harvesting, as well as pollution, are believed to be the main cause of the severe decline in abalone that reduced to almost one tenth in 20 years (Toba Fishery Union, 2004). The *ama* have noticed a gradual, but definite, change in the ocean, and made comments such as: “the seaweeds are dying like plants wilting in summer heat”, “unusual fish and shells started to appear” and “more rubbish started to get tangled in seaweeds, sea floors and shores”.

Ama Community

The decline in the aging population of *ama* is evident in the demography of the women interviewed. Some of the ‘younger’ *ama* start diving “when the children had left school, and had some free time at hand”, while others who work full-time in the city and dive on weekends and holidays refer to themselves as ‘recreational *ama*’. Another type of younger *ama* identified by the women is ‘new *ama-san*’, or young *ama*, who do not belong to the *ama* community and who go diving more or less independently. They arrive on their 50cc motorbikes already dressed in their wetsuits, and leave immediately after diving “as they have lots other things to do”.^[12] Again, with wetsuits “anyone can dive to some extent”, but the knowledge, skills and sense of ethics held by these new *ama* would be quite different from that of traditional *ama*. A 19-year-old who started to work as a ‘show *ama*’ at the Mikimoto Pearl Island in 2005,^[13] “grew up with the ocean on one of the islands and chose the job because I love the ocean and the sense of freedom”. She says she wants to “learn to whistle one day like other *ama*, and to become a real *ama*”. The whistle is clearly symbolic of *ama*, and although women do not ‘instruct the novices’, and say that ‘we all have to learn from your own experiences’, without the *ama* community, becoming a real *ama* would be a difficult task for anyone to undertake.

Conclusion: Traditional Knowledge, Environmental Ethics and Community

“Many of us are born as the tide comes in, and leave as the tide goes out” . . . “I hear the tide changing”. (Ama diver)

The *ama*’s strong sense of ethics is expressed through a number of self-regulations, as well as a wide range of rituals, ceremonies and festivities. Not only has the traditions of the *ama* allowed the practice to sustain for centuries, it has also formed timeless connections, both between one another and between the human and ‘more-than-human’ world (Abram, 1997, 2004). It is ironic that a number of external forces that breach such

ethics have caused a decline of the resources and the *ama* practice itself. On the morning of a festival held on a the Monday according to the lunar calendar, a stream of city workers and high school students headed towards the ferry terminal as on any normal day. Meanwhile, in the opposite direction of the city workers and high school students, a stream of festival goers, including fishery workers, *ama*, older generations and young children walked as if they were swimming against the current towards the festival site. It was significant that the life of the fishing villages that continue to follow the tides had little meaning to the outside world that follows the solar calendar.^[14]

Ama soundscape represents the tradition sustained by an acute sense of ethics and sense of connectivity, and symbolises the mutuality of natural and cultural conservation. The soundscape demonstrates that the women's senses, language, emotions, history, knowledge and narratives—and their life itself—are an intricate part of the natural surroundings, and that environmental degradation implies much more than a loss of external physical features, biodiversity, habitat and ecosystem, but also the loss of a vital cultural heritage.

The women's voices resonate with the tides, and their simple words sum up the *ama*'s relationship to the ocean: 'Because I love the ocean. In the water, we are so free.' For *ama*, the ocean is their identity itself. They feel most free and invigorated being in and with the ocean, sensing and feeling a world that comes through all of their senses, and through a profound connectivity with a practice that has continued for centuries. If such connectivity is no longer relevant in the outside world, clearly it is the surrounding world, not the women and their fishing community that has become out of tune.

Endnotes

[1] *Haenyeo* (sea women), *sumbi* (breath) in Chinese, and *chamusu, ujaniu* (diving women) in Korean.

[2] Population 828 in 215 households, 14 kilometres around (Toba City, 2005).

[3] Japan has 6852 small islands.

[4] The island has a primary school but no high school. There is one quarry on the other side of the harbour.

[5] Nationally, 65+ is nearing 20 percent of the total population. Thirty-one percent of Suga-shima's population is over sixty-five.

[6] The author is grateful for the expertise provided by sound artist Ross Bandt, whose observation also provided unique insights to this study.

[7] For male *ama*, different Japanese characters, or *kanji*, meaning 'sea persons' are used.

[8] Amaterasu, literally ‘shining heaven’ or ‘she who shines in heaven’. Also, Amaterasu Omikami, the highest deity worshiped at Ise Shrine.

[9] The deity, *Yamatohime*, is believed to be a daughter of 11th Emperor Suinin (*Kojiki*, *Nihonshoki*). See Aoki (1982) and Sakamoto et al. (1965-67).

[10] *Miketsu-kuni*, *umashi-kuni*. Over 1000 festivities are held at the shrine throughout the year, but the most important is the abalone offering made three times a year: June and December (*tsukinamesai*) and October (*Kannamesai*). *Tsukinamesai* used be held every month.

[11] Restrictions on location include rotation of the harvesting spots (*rinsai*) and a ‘no-wetsuits’ rule.

[12] 50cc scooters are the most popular form of transport on the island.

[13] In the region, three other tourist places employ such ‘show *ama*’.

[14] Introduced in Japan in 1872.

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