

Listening to the ocean's voice

The livelihoods and resource management practices of the *ama* community in Japan's Noto peninsula are under pressure of modernization

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Winter doesn't come softly to the western coastline of Noto peninsula, Japan. Referred to as *sotoura*, the western part of the peninsula's corrugated black volcanic rock coastline braces as the waves hit with a high velocity, sending ocean spray metres high into the air and crushing sounds echoing through the traditional cedar plank houses of the coastal communities.

But as many a northern fisher will say, the tough virility of the winter's ocean is a sign of resource benefits later to arrive at fishers' shores. At least, this is what the *ama* (literally, 'sea women') free divers on the peninsula believe. Winter is a time to watch, wait and respect the strength of the ocean. The ocean limits human access, to allow for marine life to interact, free from human intervention and, in some cases, rejuvenate life within. Even with the advancements in fishing technology that have allowed *ama* husbands to venture out into the depths of the ocean beyond their traditional harvesting borders, both the fishermen and female *ama* wait for the ocean's openings and closings as their ancestors did. Thus, although technology has changed others' connections with the ocean, for the *ama* community on this peninsula, the ocean's

voice continues to dictate the rhythms of human activities.

Winter for the *ama* on the peninsula is the time to harvest *iwanori* (rock seaweed) and *namako* (sea cucumber). As the last shades of winter fade slowly into spring, on land, the *ama*, still dressed in their thick winter wetsuits, rent harvesting rights from neighbouring town fisher co-operatives to hand-harvest non-cultured wild oysters in the coastal waters.

Not all *ama* harvest the winter waters. Some lack the physical strength to tackle the harsh winter sea. For others, a new family duty brought on by technological advancements in fisheries and fishing port infrastructure take them away from their traditional *ama* harvesting activities as they join their husbands on their global positioning system (GPS)-equipped fishing boats. Income potentials decide this as winter is more profitable on the husbands' boats and summer in the traditional *ama* harvesting waters. In the past, it was said that the annual income of an *ama* household was decided by the *ude* (literally, 'arm') or harvesting capacity of the *ama*. Many of the younger-generation *ama*, caught between carrying on the traditional life as *ama* and wanting a nine-to-five job indoors on land, find minimum-wage part-time jobs during the winter and return to the ocean in the summer.

As seasons change, so do the number of active *ama*. They increase from fewer than 40 in the winter to approximately 300 in the summer. Ages of *ama* ranged from the mid-20s to 94 during the summer season of 2012. All are either the direct descendants of the nomadic sea gypsies who, according to ethno-historical theories, originated from the Korean island of Jeju, the birthplace of their *haenyo* ancestors, the Korean matriarchs of the ocean, or have married into households with *ama* hereditary rights.

Carrying on the seasonal migratory traditions of their nomadic ancestors, from July to the end of September, the *ama* migrate from their homes in Amamachi (literally, '*ama* town') on the peninsula to Hegura Island, a small island 50 km away. Technological advancement and social change have impacted this traditional season of abalone and turban

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Ama harvest *iwanori* (rock seaweed) and *namako* (sea cucumber) in winter. They are the direct descendants of the nomadic sea gypsies from the Korean island of Jeju

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shell harvesting. Many younger *ama* with children in school on the mainland peninsula choose not to live on the island unlike their elders. These *ama* are referred to as *kayoi ama* (literally, 'commuter *ama*') because they travel the 50 km to the island waters and back daily in boats; with six to 10 *ama* and their *oyakata* (literally, 'boss', 'chief')—the *ama* husband who is also the boat owner and navigator, and considered to be the protector of the *ama* on the boat. Those who live on the island during these months harvest as their mothers and *ama* ancestors did. The *ama* ancestors first seasonally settled on Hegura Island, Nanatsujima, and seven other small islands in the area during the Tokugawa feudal era when they were granted sole harvesting and residential rights by the Lord of the Kaga domain.

Whether for mainland peninsula commuter *ama* or Hegura Island seasonal resident *ama*, the rules of harvesting are the same for all. Harvesting grounds, harvesting seasons, daily allowable harvest times, harvesting methods and gear are all discussed and decided by the collective as a whole. If, for example, the seas between the mainland peninsula and the island are too rough for the commuter *ama* to venture across but the waters around Hegura Island are calm, all are forbidden to harvest that day—a rule that was apparently debated at much length when technology changed the seasonal movement of *ama*. The discussion on allowing the use of scuba diving tanks continued for three years until the collective voice decided against it—the rejection of technological innovation having centred on opinions about the potential negative impacts that technological adoption could have on marine resources and on their heritage and cultural identity as free divers who rely on their individual physical capacities to harvest resources from the sea.

Voluntarily imposed no-take zones and allowable catch sizes, among other resource management practices, are also discussed and decided by the collective as a whole. Disagreement and dissent during discussions are allowed and understood as necessary in reaching a final collective agreement, but once the majority vote is reached, the collective decision must be adhered to by all.

Collective decisionmaking is not unique to the *ama* of Noto peninsula. As many familiar with Japanese fishing communities would know, community-based co-management is the norm. Approximately 1,600 fishery management organizations (FMOs) are the

co-managers of coastal resources along the Japanese archipelago, spanning 3,000 km from the northern boreal waters of Hokkaido to the sub-tropical waters of Okinawa. Current discussions among the *ama* community are exploring the differences between their own resource management perspectives and approaches and norms among mainly patriarchal fishing communities elsewhere in Japan.

Although generalities about gender differences can sometimes lend themselves to misleading assumptions and conclusions about both sexes, at a meeting held in February 2013, among female *ama* communities from across Japan, some voiced observations that when men were allowed *ama* rights in traditionally female *ama* communities as a result of declining female *ama* numbers, resource management became more challenging. Men have greater physical capacity to harvest and are less inclined to reduce harvesting times in order to balance harvesting outcomes with the requirements of resource sustainability. Some female *ama* went as far as to comment that male *ama* (pronounced the same as female *ama* but written literally as sea-men) had short-term visions and approaches to resource use and management; female *ama*, on the other hand, are more conscious of their cultural heritage and the traditions of centuries they carry with them every time they enter the ocean as *ama* free divers. This, in turn, some claim, contributes to their heightened consciousness about the need to manage resources within a historical cultural context.

The *ama* add that our ancestors left us with enough resources to carry on their traditions and it is our cultural obligation to ensure the sustainability of future generations. "If we tie a noose around the life of the ocean, we ultimately tie a noose around the future of *ama*", an *ama* who recently turned 60 commented.

Life is dynamic, change is inevitable and what is maintained as a constant is not always easy to predict. Social change, technological innovation and climate change—all variables of differing impact and influence—will continue to colour the *ama* harvesting seasons. Amidst the changes that reach their shores, just how the *ama* of Noto peninsula will maintain their cultural heritage as female free divers is difficult to say. Be assured, however, that future decisions, as in the past, will not be made in silence; there will be active discussions among all, as is in keeping with the *ama* traditions. ❏