

# AMA 海女 (WOMEN DIVERS) AS A CULTURAL RELIC: SOME NOTES ON MARITIME CONTINUITIES LINKING JAPAN AND THE PHILIPPINE-ASIAN PACIFIC

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These notes are my attempt at establishing points of linkage between cultural components of certain communities in the Philippines and some features of the ‘women divers’ tradition known as *ama* in Japan (*heanyeo* in Korea). It is suggested that there are points of similarity between the Japanese and Philippine material, which include the lifestyle of seasonally working away from home and women’s significant role in facilitating subsistence activities. The Philippine maritime context is discussed using data from the sea-oriented Bajau people and from the Visayas, and specifically the following notions: the *kampong ayer* or water villages, the *atob* or stone weirs for fishing, and *rendang* as a ‘food for wanderers’. Moreover, there are parallels in how abalone in particular may be regarded with special status. The *ama* in Japan have the sole right to dive for abalone (*tokubushi*) which is also considered the offering par excellence to the Ise Shrine dedicated to the female goddess Amaterasu Omikami, while abalone (*kapinan*) for Cebuanos is considered an item of good luck and wellness. The Ise Shrine is built on pillars set directly in the ground, which can be compared to the houses on stilts found in the water villages of the Bajau.

**Keywords:** *Ama, abalone, Ise Shrine, Bajau, maritime culture*

## Introduction

I first visited the *ama* villages in Mie Prefecture in 2008 to attend a conference and join a study tour with a delegation of islanders from the Jeju Special Self-Governing Province of South Korea. The study tour was organized as a cultural exchange between women divers: the *ama* from Mie, Japan; and *haanyeo* of Jeju, Korea. The context was the promotion of *ama*

and *haenyeo* cultures toward being registered as a UNESCO World Heritage.<sup>1</sup> The Korean delegation was composed of three *haenyeo*, the youngest of whom was 71 years old then and said to be a living national treasure for her virtuosity in their songs. Because of this experience I have returned to Goza twice, in March 2009 and August 2010. It is of great interest for me to know that like the fishers of the Visayas (Zayas 1994) and the Bajau who periodically leave their homes or moorages/water villages, the *ama* in the past also seasonally left home to work. In fact, it was common to see a whole family travel and journey great distances to find work. Many young *ama* travelled in groups to work away from their natal homes as well (Bouchy 1999).

These notes are my attempts to establish points of linkages between some features of *ama* traditional culture and Philippine maritime culture. It is suggested that the relic forms of the *ama* fishery bear similarities to contemporary Bajau and Visayan fisheries in the Philippines. Both cultures follow the lifestyle of seasonally working away from home and women play significant roles in facilitating subsistence activities. There is also resemblance in the symbolic significance of abalone, which are gathered only by *ama*, as offering par excellence to the Ise Shrine, and some Philippine lowlander's use of abalone as one of the items for good luck and wellness.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the building dedicated to the female goddess Amaterasu Omikami in the Ise Shrine is built on pillars set directly in the ground which to me, recalls the houses on stilts found in the water villages of Southeast Asian Bajaus.

I also want to propose here some cultural items which, I think, give some clues on possible linkages between the *ama* culture and Philippine maritime culture. Borne out of my interest in the relics of maritime culture in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, so far I have among other things studied houses on stilts in association with matrilocal residence, a dish that has 'wandered around' for some time, and 'a gentle way to catch fish'—

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<sup>1</sup> The populations of *ama* in Japan and the *haenyeo* in Korea are both declining due to the availability of work in the tourism industry. To compensate for the lack of *ama* in Isheshima in Izu Prefecture, the fishing associations with rights for women divers contract with middlemen from Korea to provide women divers specially from Jeju.

<sup>2</sup> In Sebuano, [kapin] means 'surplus' or abundance (communication with informant from Moalbal Cebu). Thus the offering symbolizes the wish for prosperity for the newly built house and its dwellers. Ati ambulant peddlers sell *kapinan* 'native abalone' to be used as part of the offerings before the construction of a house (Zayas 2008a, 2008b, 2001).

*kampong ayer* (water village), *rendang* (carabao stew in coconut milk), and *atob* in Visayan languages or *ishihimi* 石干見 in Japanese (stone tidal weir). These studies are my attempt to identify distinctive features of maritime cultures and societies in Asia and the Pacific in the notion that there are certain concepts that would define common maritime cultural features of the region.

### Relics as sources of knowledge

What I am referring to as ‘relics’ are material and behavioral repositories of our cultural memories. Relics are indicative of who we are, and indelible marks of one’s identity. Studies in relics are attempts at answering how such relics came to be and what they continue to signify to the local population in contemporary time (Zayas 2008a).

The notion of *kampong ayer* is one such relic. This refers to a human settlement of the Bajau of Southern Philippines, North Borneo, and other islands in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, the Bajau are also referred to as Sama d’laut or ‘sea gypsies’. Essentially houseboat dwellers, they have just recently settled in water villages or *kampong ayer*. These villages are clustered after their mooring arrangements, and each cluster of houses on piles is called *kauman*. In a *kauman*, houses are linked by footways ending in the house of the chief, where one finds the *pantan*, a wide thatched platform where members usually gather while working, chatting with each other, or simply passing the time in the heat of the afternoon. This cluster of extended families has a matrilineal residence rule (Zayas 2007).

*Rendang* is a relic dish that is dynamic as it recreates itself wherever it finds its way in Southeast Asia. It is a carabao meat stew served during special occasions. The meat is simmered for a long time in coconut milk with many fresh spices. It adapts itself to the taste buds of the locals and, of course, the availability of spices. In presenting *rendang* as a relic cuisine, I tried to retrace the footsteps of those who brought the dish into the emporium environment of Southeast Asia, the markets, the port towns, the shelter ports, etc. *Rendang*, among the Minangkabau people of Sumatra, is called a dish ‘for those wandering’, *merantau*. This dish also identifies Southeast Asians with a sojourning culture where the practice of *merantau*, a journey away from home undertaken by males to learn about the world, is common (Zayas 2008b).

Another relic is the *atob*, an ancient fishing gear that had been common in Asia and the Pacific. *Atob* are generally arc-shaped stone barriers built on long sloping tidal flats in such a way that when the tide rises, the barrier fills up with sea water and retains fish when the tide recedes. Nishimura

(1972/2003) refers to it as a living fossil of stationary fishing gear with ancient origins. It is also a way to gain more from a limited amount of time. Weir operators can simultaneously engage in other activities such as farming. Studying these weirs, now mostly in ruins<sup>3</sup>, it is possible to trace the story of certain community-based fisheries, the concept of the commons, and origins of other fishing gears (Zayas 2009).

These relics operate in the context of local knowledge. What connects them – the stone fish trap, village settlement pattern, and food concept – is an abstract sense that has been handed down from one generation to another in terms of skills in crafts or technology, village/hamlet organization or formation, or a gut feeling for the right blend of spices. All these, with some

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<sup>3</sup> Some *atob* are being preserved, such as one found in Antique, Panay Island in the Philippines: the daughter of Aquilino Chavez allows neighbors to collect fish in any part of their *atob*, except the *taun* [‘non-return valve’]. Stone tidal weirs are gigantic stone barriers, often horseshoe-shaped, built on gradually sloping reef tides. When the tide rises, sea water overflows through the stone barriers, trapping accompanying sea animals which can simply be collected by hand. (Zayas n.d.). Aquilino Chavez with the help of his nephew built his *atob* or stone tidal weir in Tinigbas, Antique, Panay. His *atob* has a *taun*, at the deepest end towards the sea, of the horseshoe stone wall. It is a non-return valve made of bamboo. Essentially the inner circle of the *atob* that is built with stone by Chavez is his own. However, as the sea is a common property, the sharing of the catch is evidence of the notion of *kumon* or commons. Let me quote what I have written earlier:

Until about 2006, relatives and neighbors would share among themselves fish, shells, etc. trapped in the weir, politely gathering them after the owner had his fill. Children frolicked inside the weir while adults gathered shells clinging to the piled stones. In the village of Tinigbas, the community has an implicit agreement that no one can own an *atob*. Concretely speaking, the reefs or the inter-tidal flats are common property of the village. The “accidental” presence of the stone tidal weir in the inter-tidal flats does not entail ownership of the space where the weir is located. Although the builder may say that he built the weir, he cannot claim ownership of the space where it is located. However, builders can claim as theirs the catchment (non-return valve) called *taun*, and the stones used for building the weir.

This gives them a semblance of ownership, as they can harvest from their *taun* and, if they so wish, can sell the stones. In some cases, stones are merely picked and re-used to build a new *atob*. Perhaps the idea is that whatever is left in the common area may be utilized by others if the former proprietor has lost interest and abandoned it (Zayas n.d.).

exceptions, have been stored in the bodies and minds of the descendants or the culture-bearers. Such body of knowledge/embodied knowledge would be referred to as ‘knowledge heritage’ (*zhihuïyican* 智慧遺產) by the people of the island of Jibei, in the Pescadores, Taiwan (Zayas n.d.).

### The *ama* connection

I believe that the *ama* way of life is an ancient relic of one type of maritime cultural tradition which has existed in some parts of Japan. This is evidenced from literary and archaeological sources from the Narra Period wooden tablets. Otomo no Yakamochi (718-785 AD) believed to be the compiler of Manyoshu wrote about the Hegura *ama* diver when he visited Noto Peninsula in 748 AD.

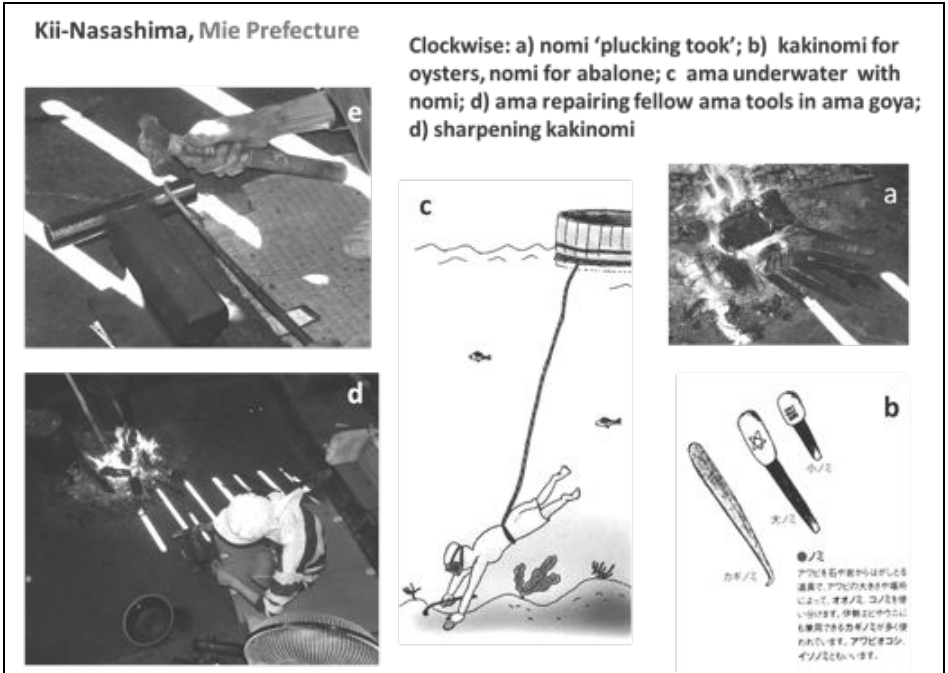
In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the imperial capital of Japan was established in Narra. During this period (718-785 AD) the capital was patterned after a Tang Dynasty City in a grid-type city planning. During this period, Otomo no Yakamochi (718-785 AD) believed to be the compiler of Manyoshu<sup>4</sup> wrote about the Hegura *ama* diver when he visited Noto Peninsula in 748 AD. Wooden tables or mokka is where the reference to the Hegura *ama* was found. Hegurajima, is located on the western part of Northwestern Japan facing the Japan Sea. So far this is the oldest record about women divers in Japan.

Presently, the *ama* continue to dive, no longer as itinerant fishers like that of the Narra Period, but they stay in their villages as they have been given exclusive rights to free dive in the Prefectural waters of their towns. Women divers use simple tools to collect abalone, arch shells, Japanese lobsters (*Ise ebi*), seaweed, etc. (Nagashima & Zayas n.d.). They often go out as couples, where the husband brings his *ama* wife to the dive spot with his motor boat and later assists in bringing her up to the boat. In one of my fieldvisits, I have observed that *ama* make their own tools, from the mesh bag to *kakinomi* or steel plucking tool (Fig.1).

From the work I have done since 2008, I noticed an important structure: a cottage called *amagoïa* where *ama* warm themselves before and after diving (Fig.2). It is also a place where they share their joys and sorrows both as diver, mother and wife.

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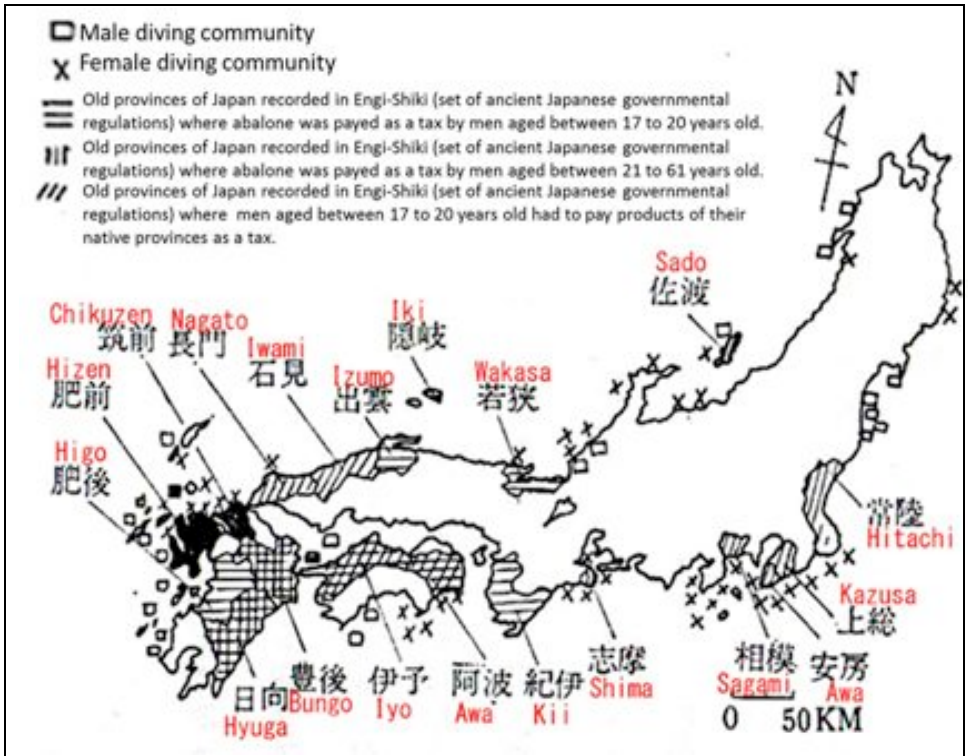
<sup>4</sup> Manyoshu, "Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves" is the oldest existing collection of Japanese poetry.



**Figure 1.** Ama tools. [Source: Nagashima & Zayas (n.d.)]



**Figure 2.** Ama goya in the Mie Prefecture.



**Figure 3.** This composite map (in Nagashima & Zayas n.d.) shows the distribution of main communities where male and female divers could be found in Japan around the 10th century. Surprisingly, only men of certain age groups were required to pay products of their provinces as tax. [Map prepared with the assistance of Terue Yamauchi, especially her translations and notes on the composite.]

From my limited reading of the ama literature and from my several visits, (2008-2015, around 8 times) to Shima City in Mie Prefecture where my ama informants live, I observed some possible linkages of Philippine Asian-Pacific cultural tradition to ama traditional culture. These linkages are demonstrated in distinct characteristics. One is the matrifocal (female or mother-focused) tendency of the family structure of the ama. Another is the aspect of wandering, or to seasonally work away from home: it was said that some time ago it was common that groups of young ama, or ama with their whole family, would sail to travel far and wide, and perhaps settle later in a place conducive to their livelihood (Segawa 1946, 1953; Kawaoka 1983 in Bouchy 1999).

A third aspect is the importance of *tokuboshi* elephant ear abalone as an offering item to the Ise Shrine. Ise Shrine is dedicated to the foremost Shinto goddess Amaterasu Omikami and represents female-centered religion. Abalone is the ‘best offering’ and it is traditionally collected only by women divers since the ancient time (despite the presence of male divers).



**Figure 4.** The Ise Shrine is the prototype of all Shinto Shrines in Japan.<sup>5</sup>

There exists in popular knowledge in Japan a theory that the ancestors of ancient Japanese were the 海人 or ‘people of the sea’. The Chinese character was transformed into 海女 or ama, ‘female diver’. If indeed the ancestors were wandering bands dominated by women divers, the Ise Shrine architecture, built on pillars set directly in the ground, strongly indicates origins from across the seas. Bouchy (1999) mentioned that during the Eiroku Era (1558 through 1570), the ama ‘crossed the seas’ and landed at Hegura Island and Wajima (Bouchy 1999). Perhaps the ancestors of the present-day ama might even have come all the way from Southeast Asia, in the fashion of the wandering boat people, the Bajau, who used to live in house boats and who are now settled, even if periodically, in water villages in houses that are built on pillars (stilts) of wood.

<sup>5</sup> [Source: [greatbuildings.com/cgi-bin/gbc-drawing.cgi/Ise\\_Shrine.html/Ise\\_Naigu\\_Shrine\\_Elev\\_A.html](http://greatbuildings.com/cgi-bin/gbc-drawing.cgi/Ise_Shrine.html/Ise_Naigu_Shrine_Elev_A.html)]



The notions of *kampong ayer* or ‘matrifocal settlement’, *rendang* as ‘wanderer food’, the *atob* stone weir as ancient fishing method, and the *ama* ‘women divers’, have survived the breadth of time and space albeit in various forms as they have to contend with unique local cultures and adaptations. However, each form visibly contains its past and this is why I have tried to focus on them in my attempt to establish common maritime cultural features of Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

### Acknowledgments

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