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Living with ever-changing currents: Following an *ama* diving community over one decade

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Timo Thelen

Thursday
2024-03-14
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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Japanese *ama* (professional free-diving women) are well-known from various documentaries and movies, most prominently from *James Bond: You Only Live Twice* (1967), or also from the NHK Morning Drama Series *Amachan* (2013). While their popular image as exoticized “pseudo-mermaids” is still spread in the media, *ama* divers are, in reality, hard-working and often remotely living people from the Japanese countryside, facing themselves with the profound impacts of a modern world and trying to arrange their lives in a steady negotiation of old and new, local and global, human and environment.

This lecture will reflect on Timo Thelen’s fieldwork on the *ama* diving community of Hegura Island / Wajima City spanning from 2014 to 2023. During this period, the *ama* community, on the one hand, struggled with an aging population, unsteady prices for their catches, and declining resources. But, on the other hand, they also experienced attempts of revitalization and support from the regional

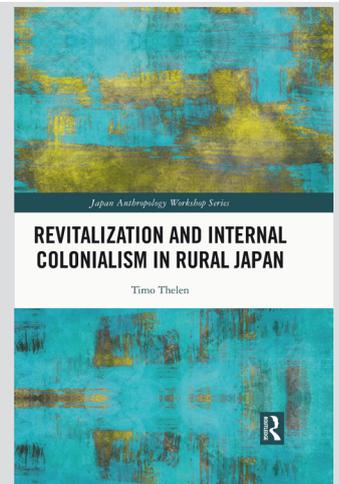
government and researchers, such as the designation of their fishery practices as immaterial cultural heritage or the establishment of the abalone festival – a commercial event centered on their catches. Yet, even under the inevitable menace of environmental changes caused by the global warming and international crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the *ama* community always managed to cope with diverse obstacles and preserved their fishery practices in a sustainable manner. The Noto Peninsula Earthquake of New Year’s Day 2024, however, caused a yet incomparable disaster to the community, whose aftermath will affect them for many years to come.

Beyond the popular mystifications, this lecture aims to present a more accurate and nuanced portrayal of the *ama* community, how they experienced substantial changes and how they reacted to them.



Timo Thelen

is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of International Studies in Kanazawa University. He has received his PhD in Modern Japan Studies from Dusseldorf University. His research focusses on media, tourism, and rural culture. His monograph *Revitalization and Internal Colonialism in Rural Japan* was released in the Japan Anthropology Workshop Series at Routledge in 2022.



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