

Previous page: Woodblock print by Kuniyoshi (ca. 1830) showing the Suikoden hero Rorihakucho Chojun breaking through a water gate. This is one of the more popular tattoo motifs from the Suikoden.



Above: Same motif as previous page. Here tattooed as a back piece by Horishachi. (Tattoo convention, Osaka, April 2010)

Japanese traditional tattooing in modern Japan

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Preface

This paper came into being as part of my master's degree in Japanese studies at the University of Oslo. Already in the first semester we were asked to choose a topic for our thesis papers and I had no clue what to choose. Being something of a scatter brain and a person who has a hard time sticking to my guns, I quickly realized I needed to choose something close to me, something not to dry and academic, and something of personal and enduring interest in order to keep myself motivated throughout the project if I were to have any hope of completing the task. I ransacked my brain time and time again, but continued to come up short. While hanging out between classes, a friend of mine commented on the tattoo on my left arm and then it hit me, Japanese tattooing.

At first I was somewhat skeptical about the idea. I knew next to nothing about Japanese tattooing for one thing. However I had grown to admire them considerably. When I first saw them in pictures many years ago, I remember thinking them to be weird creations. Why would anyone put a picture on their body? A symbol or simple design I could relate to, but a full scale pictorial design covering entire body parts? There was something uniquely fascinating about them from the first moment however. The more I saw of them, the more fascinated and attracted I became until one day I decided to cover my upper left arm with one myself. The tattoo however did not come with a history, art or culture lesson, I only liked them by appearance. So while I still knew little about Japanese tattooing at the beginning of the master's program, I came to consider this a great opportunity to combine personal curiosity with academic endeavor. There was also the problem of coming up with an alternative, so Japanese tattooing it was. Good choice it was too, as it fitted nicely with most of my conditions for a thesis topic.

My initial idea for a specific research focus, based as it was on my preconceived notions, crashed spectacularly on my first fumbling attempt at field research. Nervous to the point of quivering, I met with the master Horiyoshi III of Yokohama for my first interview with a Japanese tattoo artist. As I stutteringly asked my questions, he more or less dismissed all my notions of Japanese

tattoos, or at least so it felt at the time. Perhaps not the best idea to pick the most famous tattoo artist in the world for your first interview, but he was the only one I could find to begin with. Despite my initial reaction of being intimidated and having my notions of Japanese tattoo culture decimated, he turned out to be a most gracious man, welcoming me back for a follow up and introducing me to his client, who again introduced me to others and so got the ball rolling.

The experience did make me question my research focus though and this turned out to be a recurring feature of this project. I am still somewhat unsure where the focus is and where it should be. If they coincide, it almost feels as though it is just that, coincidence. Not knowing much about this subject to begin with and knowing other enthusiast like me are probably in the same boat, I was eager to cover as much as possible regarding Japanese tattooing. I think this is reflected in my paper, possibly to its academic detriment, probably to its wavering focus, but also hopefully to it being an interesting read. While most of what I have learned about Japanese tattooing is covered here, I hope I have managed to keep it grounded in, and focused on the people I have interviewed and their relations to Japanese tattoos, thus reflecting the place of traditional Japanese tattoos in an urban, modern Japan.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me complete this project, especially all the people I interviewed and talked to about tattooing, for sharing their private thoughts with me and making this possible. どうも有難う御座います I'd also like to thank all my professors at the University of Oslo. My supervisor, Dick Stegewerns, for his help and support in writing this paper and who no doubt could have helped me make this a better paper had I gotten started on the writing process a little earlier. The administrative staff for answering all questions and always providing good help in bureaucratic procedures. Thanks also to my teachers and fellow students in the kangaerutamenonihongo classes at Waseda who gave me the chance to use tattoo related interviews for the class project and who listened, discussed, gave advice and let me air my thoughts on the subject.

Thanks to all my friends and family who always supported me, especially my mother, brother and Ragnhild who helped with reading through my paper and provided suggestions and encouragement when I hit the wall. For putting my head back in place in the final rush to the deadline. To my father for financial and moral support and putting my head in its place at the end of field research, my nephews Sondre and Mikkel whose smiling pictures in the living room lights me up when darkness rolls in. To the Tanakas whose doors are always open. To my fellow student and friend who's been there through the whole master's program, Sissel; big thanks! To the tattoo community of the world; keep buzzing and sticking, and don't ever give up!

Introduction

As the title suggests, the theme for this paper is Japanese traditional tattooing as it exists in modern day, urban Japan. So what is Japanese traditional tattooing? Well that is exactly what I wanted to find out, and it is one of the central questions I am trying to answer in this paper. That and how it exists in modern day, urban Japan. Specifically, I claim that the contemporary practices of Japanese traditional tattooing are a living continuation of its practices in the past Edo period and post war era through the 80's. I will do this by focusing on the motivation for getting these tattoos and their function as a talisman or other self-empowering device and the social position of both the practice of tattooing and the people who get tattoos.

As the theme for this paper is probably a largely unknown and fraught with mystery to most readers, I will cover a lot of background material as well as the more central research focus in order to make it as accessible and understandable as possible. I also think this is necessary to answer all my questions. It is also my hope that this may contribute to dispelling some of the misconceptions and the negative public image of Japanese traditional tattoos.

This is valuable research for several reasons. The interest in tattooing in general is very high and continues to grow, both academically and in general. Japanese tattooing is generally held in very high regard by those with an interest in the subject of tattooing. There is however not that much research on the topic available. Most of what is available are shorter articles dealing with few or a single aspect of the subject, most of them focusing on history. I've tried to sum that up here while hopefully adding new insight from my own field research and use of theory. As such I hope I have made a valuable addition to existing research on the subject.

The paper starts with introducing some tattoo terminology and definitions. The introduction also includes accounts of previous research and my own research.

Part one contains historical and cultural aspects covering the history of Japanese tattooing, its public image in Japan and in the west. It also includes an account of the practical and technical

aspects of tattooing. I have tried to add some new interpretations and insights in each section.

Part two contains an explanation of the main theory used in the following section that accounts for the interviews from field research and their interpretation.

The conclusion draws on the findings from all the previous sections where most of the research questions have been answered. This hopefully explains the cultural phenomenon of traditional Japanese tattooing and thus answers the remaining and ultimate research question in this paper.

Following the bibliography, I have included an afterword that accounts for my own tattooing experience that might also shed a little light on the subject.

Tattoo definitions

Flash

Pre-designed tattoo art. Usually displayed in great numbers on posters or in a book from which customers can choose a design.

Custom

Custom designs made to order for each customer.

One point

This refers to a single tattoo covering less than an entire body part with little or no background. Mostly Japanese term used about small western designs as opposed to the large native designs. All of the non-Japanese above examples are one point tattoos.

Japanese traditional





Traditional Japanese tattoo designs. Pictures taken during field research in Japan.

Large, bold, pictorial designs with colors and lined in black, usually, but not necessarily with black background consisting of running water, waves, clouds, wind and rocks and covering areas no smaller than the entire upper arm. Normally all pieces of the tattoo will flow together naturally, forming a single large artwork even if it covers several body parts. The designs may also contain leaves, flowers, lightning and other elements as embellishments, but rarely as motifs in their own right. Typical motifs include the dragon, carp, tiger, lion, snakes, hannya (Japanese spirit or demon), Buddhist deities, legendary or religious figures or creatures such as the wind god and thunder god, temple guardians or heroes from the suikoden (Japanese adaptation of Chinese literary classic about rebellious bandit heroes. Covered in detail later. See also example above.) According to one tattooist with whom I spoke, the black background of the tattoos is because the tattoos are images of night time scenes. The tattoos can both be flash tattoos and custom designs. Usually it is a combination though with a customer choosing from a series of prints and the artist modifying it or adding embellishments to suit the customer.

Strictly speaking it should only include artwork done by someone trained in the art in a traditional master, apprentice relationship, executed entirely by hand rather than machine and with a design conforming to the design rules of the trade (such as carp generally swimming upstream, not mixing flowers or other embellishments that occur in different seasons in nature). Recently however, lining by hand is all but unheard of and not many color by hand either. There are also highly skilled artists that are self-trained, have an incomplete apprenticeship or follow a more western style of informal apprenticeship, learning by working with different masters and in different studios, gradually picking up the trade. It may have been possible to rigidly define traditional tattooing in the past; presently however I find it more useful to think of it as a scale with an artwork or artist being more traditional the more they or it conforms to the above criteria. For this paper I have spoken to and interviewed the whole gamut of artists and bearers of artwork, from the avant-garde to the completely traditional, but generally trying to keep it as traditional as possible.

Old school



Old school heart tattoo design downloaded from www.tattoo-designs-free.com

This is the type of tattoo that probably first comes to mind when you think of tattoos, the traditional tattoos of western tattoo art. They typically are bold designs with black outlining and bold colors, containing little or no shading and background. Think rock'n'roll and sailor tattoos and you probably get the idea. Typical motifs include the heart, flowers, anchors, sail ships, skulls, daggers, cards, dice, flames, pin ups etc. Flash art or reminiscent of flash art. One point.

New School



New school heart tattoo design downloaded from www.freetattoodesigns.org

Not unlike old school, but with some variation. Many of the same motifs, but with some sort of twist. More colors, shading and background. Frequently covering entire or several body parts. Influence from psychedelia, graffiti and other arts. More room for artistic expression. Usually custom work.

Tribal



Tribal heart tattoo design downloaded from www.tattoo-designs-free.com

Single color (traditionally black, but red is also used today) patterns consisting of lines and or dots. Largely inspired by traditional Maori and Polynesian designs, but currently also Nordic, Celtic or self-imagined patterns are used. Comes in both flash and custom variations, one point and covering entire body parts.

Previous research

Previous research into this subject can be divided into two categories, research on tattooing in general and research on Japanese tattooing. Except for some research into its history, the research on tattooing in general does not cover Japanese tattooing at all.

Tattooing in general

Research on tattooing has generally been conducted within the following academic subjects: Anthropology, psychology and psychiatry, social anthropology and cultural studies, and sociology. This is also a more or less chronological order of when the various academic subjects entered the field. There have also been studies on the history of tattooing, but I am not aware of any such study being undertaken by an actual historian. Mostly they are a part of studies within other subjects. An anthropological study of tattooing might have a section on history for instance. While there are books on the history of tattooing, most of these are written by tattoo artists or other enthusiasts rather than academics. Also a study of the history of tattooing in general would be far too great in scope to be contained within a single book if it were to be done in detail as there is not a single place in the world that has not had a practice of tattooing at one time or another.

The earliest examples of research on tattooing are research by anthropologists on the tattoo practices of various tribal people. Such studies would often focus on ritual, but also the social meanings of the tattoos within the tribal community. Little if any of this is of any value to a contemporary study of tattooing though. While certain modern groups may involve ritual in their tattooing practices, these studies would be far less useful than Anthropological theories concerning ritual in general.

Psychological and psychiatric studies concerning tattooing generally treat tattooing as a symptom of some sort of mental illness or social deviancy such as criminal delinquency, sexual deviance

(usually homosexuality and/or sadomasochism) and self-mutilation. While most of these are outdated and one sided with little relevance or value to the contemporary student of tattooing, Favazza (1996) provides one of the most complete and objective studies of self-mutilation and body modification, offering considerable insight into the psychological mechanisms behind such behavior.

Social anthropological, cultural and sociological studies of tattooing are all contemporary studies. These tend to give fairly broad accounts of tattooing, but invariably center on western society. While the influence of traditional Japanese tattoos on western tattoos might be mentioned, there is little of direct relevance to a study of Japanese tattooing here other than to serve as some kind of guideline to how such a study might be carried out. Instead it would be more useful to use general theory from these subjects, such as identity theory, social body theories, Bourdieu's habitus etc. Examples in this category are "the sociogenesis of a body art" by Michael Atkinson and "bodies of inscription" by Margo DeMello.

While I might make some use of all of these, for the purposes of this paper I find the psychological theories coupled with theory regarding ritual to be the most interesting in that they give a good view of the internal mechanisms involved and as such most closely adheres to my original intentions for this paper. Specifically, I will rely on Favazza as he does just this, combine theory on self-mutilation/body modification with theory on ritual to come up with a two-sided view on the behavior.

Japanese tattooing

There has not been done much research on Japanese tattooing at all. There is a whole slew of picture books with some accompanying text concerning artists, Japanese tattoo history and iconography, some of considerable quality by tattoo masters and others in the know, but none of them directly academic. "The Japanese tattoo" by Donald Richie and Ian Buruma is a good example of this type of book. Van Gulik is the only western academic to devote a full book to the subject. His section on history and on the trade of the tattoo master is detailed and highly

valuable to a student of this subject. The section on the dragon tattoo and its relation to firemen as a protective talisman against fire is very interesting, offering a structural analysis based on Sino-Japanese myths, five elements theory and yin-yang theory. However its structuralism approach is arguably dated today. It is also questionable whether or not his presentation resembles the Edo fireman's own thinking on the subject. It does provide a solid framework and cultural background from which to understand the fireman's dragon tattoo however, and is thus definitely of some value as such. It might also provide for an interesting basis for comparison with present day similar talismantic aspects of tattooing. The rest deals with Ainu and pre-historic tattooing. Poysden & Bratt also has a good history section, but focus too much on the yakuza. Aside from Van Gulik, one of the better, earlier academic works on the subject by a western scholar is McCallum's article "historical and cultural dimensions of the tattoo in Japan". While not an academic work, Michael McCabe still provides valuable insight into the tattoo culture of modern Japan. Yamada Mieko's article "Westernization and cultural resistance in tattooing practices in contemporary Japan" from 2009 is a valuable contemporary addition to the field accounting for the position of traditional tattooing in contemporary Japan and its struggle to maintain its integrity in the face of globalization and the modern tattoo scene. Another contemporary article of note is Joy Hendry's "The Japanese tattoo: Play or Purpose?" appearing in "Japan at play" from 2002. The article examines the practice of tattooing by means of the cultural anthropological concept of "play". While entailing an aspect of playfulness, "play" in this case is not necessarily just fun and games. It is a concept through which one can examine and understand human behavior and social interaction just as one might do so by the concept of ritual. While not sufficient by itself to explain tattooing, it is a fresh take on the subject and offers a valuable new perspective. When it comes to work by Japanese scholars, the situation remains much the same. There are a few more serious works and more detail, but still very little and most of it centered on history. Tamabayashi Haruo is perhaps one of the most central sources. The book however is nigh impossible to get a hold of and written in 1936 a most cumbersome read. Also its main value is as a historical reference. Yamamoto Yoshimi is a contemporary scholar providing a detailed account of the history of tattooing in Japan and the prohibitions against it. She includes also the Ainu, Okinawa and Taiwan as all are or have been a part of the Japanese empire at some point. Neither provides much insight into the culture of tattooing today. For that we have to turn to the work of another contemporary scholar, Saito Takushi. He provides insight into contemporary tattoo

culture and the reasons why people choose to get tattoos. He does however make little distinction between traditional Japanese tattoos and other types of tattooing.

As should be clear from the above, there is definitely a need for further research in this field. Any research in any area of this field and under any academic subject would be a valuable addition to the existing material, and it is my modest hope that this paper may be one such small contribution.

Research methods

My research for this paper started almost immediately after enrolling in the master's program by reading many of the above mentioned books. At that point though, I had no experience from the actual tattoo scene in Japan and as such most of my ideas were based on preconceived notions and outdated books. With the rising popularity of Japanese style tattoos in the west and knowing that many western tattooists would be interested in a thorough written work about the iconography of traditional Japanese tattooing, this became my initial focus. I knew however that the tattooists themselves would be far better than me at decoding the purely technical aspects of it and explanations of the various designs' general meanings were to be found in other books, so I had to come up with something else. Inspired by the section on social psychology in Donald Richie's book and van Gulik's treatment of the talismanic protective value of the dragon tattoo to Edo period firemen, I had the idea that I would do something similar regarding a wide range of motives.

My first tentative steps in the field researcher's shoes though, quickly revealed to me that this was not feasible. First there were far too many motifs to cover them all and focusing on just a select few would rob the original idea of much of its charm. Secondly, the tattoo scene had changed considerably since the early 80's when Richie and van Gulik wrote their books. The traditional groups (tattoo appreciation societies, craftsmen and workers with roots in Edo culture) that they described were not as many as I had thought. While tattooists assured me that such groups did exist, they were few and hard to find. So while I continued to hope to be able to get an introduction to someone with connections to such a group, I realized I could not make them my main sources of field information. Thirdly, the sort of talismanic value and similar meanings of tattoos would probably be hard to come by even if I found interview subjects who held to such beliefs. As one tattooist explained to me, there was some superstition regarding such beliefs; if they were spoken aloud, it would ruin the effect. So, say for instance if someone got a dragon tattoo in hopes of gaining power, then explaining that to me would prevent that hope from coming through. Sadly this was explained to me only near the end of my research. I had tried to interview women a couple of times and succeeded only once, and even then the woman was quite

close lipped. Upon asking the tattooist about this, I was explained the aforementioned superstition and told that this probably applied even more to women. So while I through most of my research I continued to pry for such information, I rarely got the clear cut answers I was hoping for. Now, I could use this to say there was no supporting evidence for my initial hypothesis and just leave it hanging as there was no conclusive evidence to disprove it either. I could also come up with some sort of ad hoc hypothesis that could be supported by my findings. Both options seemed somewhat disappointing and unsatisfactory. In the end I realized I could do both however, gaining as much insight as possible from my research.

As this is the insight I actually gained myself through this research, presenting it as such in my paper seems to me also the most honest and thorough way of doing it. Also by taking the findings of my research and coupling it with appropriate psychological theory; I could begin to approach my original intentions for this paper. Consequently this paper is founded not on some exotic traditional group or fantastic properties of traditional Japanese tattoo, both of which are hard to find and to verify. Rather it is founded on research among regular people in the current tattoo culture of modern Japan, both easy to find and thus verify or dismiss for those willing to look and ask. It focuses not so much on meaning through iconography as on meaning through personal intent and psychology.

While I started researching immediately upon deciding my topic, the bulk of the field research was carried out between early February 2010 and early May 2010. It started with some tentative steps autumn 2008 however when I attended language classes in Japan for a year as part on a language experience extension of the master's program. Originally I did not intend these initial probings into the field to be of consequence to my final paper, I realize however that they have been part of the experience that has formed my view of the field and that some of my initial discoveries were indeed instrumental in directing me to my final destination. As such I have decided to include them here briefly.

This part of my inquiries took part between September 2008 and July 2009. Most of them were quite informal apart from one interview with a tattoo master and his client in November 2008 and a lengthy interview with another tattoo master in June 2009 that also included some follow-up

conversations. For both interviews I brought a recorder and took some notes after the interview. Both were used for projects in language classes, but they were unlike the other inquiries done during this period intended to be a part of this paper or at least an introduction to further relevant research. The last of these ended up becoming a central informant to this project, introducing me to several of his clients and letting me hang out in his studio. The first I already mentioned in the preface. After the interview, his client took me to a famous tattoo shop in Tokyo were there was an after party/tattoo session following an international tattoo convention in Tokyo. While I did not do any formal research there, it did make me understand that it would be hard to single out Japanese traditional tattooing from other forms as a research subject. For better or worse, they coexist in a modern tattoo culture.

Also during this period I did some brief interviews and questionnaires regarding public opinion about tattoos among students and some random people on the streets, even including a police officer. I would also talk to friends and acquaintances about tattoos and pester tattooed strangers in bars about their tattoos and ask for introductions to their tattooist. It was on one such occasion that the extensively tattooed bar tender of my favorite hangout promised to introduce me to his tattooist, a traditionally trained Japanese tattoo master and my second interviewee who became central during my second foray into the field.

February 10 I left for Tokyo with the express purpose of doing field research for this paper, staying for three months. I started by contacting the tattoo master from my second interview from my previous stay in Japan. He graciously allowed me to hang out in his studio, talking to him and his customers while he worked. The material from these sessions forms the bulk of my research material.

In the beginning I had intended to record all the interviews, but this proved difficult for many of the sessions. If I talked to the customers for a brief period just before or after their tattooing sessions and for scheduled interviews, I would record them. Most of the time however the conversation would go on and off during the tattoo session. With so many breaks in the conversation and so much off topic talk, including private conversation between the tattoo master and the customer, I decided to forgo recording. It also means that I did not use a questionnaire nor

had a sheet of set questions as a guide.

As it turned out, this worked better in any case. The conversation flowed more naturally as it was no pressure on either side to keep the conversation at a steady pace. We could take breaks when I needed to take notes, if the client was busy gritting his teeth through a particularly painful spot of tattooing or if the conversation just ran dry for a moment, then either of us could pick it up again when it felt natural. Many of the people I talked to seemed nervous or uncomfortable when I brought out the recorder, so in the end I think I got better results for the unrecorded interviews. Mostly I would just jot down key words and phrases, but also longer passages when needed.

This tattoo master had apprenticed to a well-known tattoo master and previously did traditional Japanese tattoos exclusively. He had since started his own studio and was at this time doing other styles as well. This provided me with access to a wide range of clients of different styles of tattoo. This studio and all the clients were in Tokyo.

I also got a chance to attend a tiny tattoo event in a small café in Tokyo. A friend of mine provided me with introductions to the Japanese scholar Yamamoto Yoshimi who invited me to this event were she held a presentation of her research. She also graciously provided me with a copy of her PhD dissertation by e-mail. At the event I also got the chance to take some pictures and briefly talk to a few people with traditional Japanese tattoos. There were no opportunities for any formal interviews though, but I still felt I got useful information from these conversations.

At the same tattoo event I also met a tattooist based in Saitama with whom I met for an interview at a later date. He also provided me with introductions to one of his clients, my only female interviewee apart from one of the attendees at the café event. He was more or less self-trained, but did almost only traditional Japanese style tattoos.

A few people with traditional Japanese tattoos I met more or less by chance. One of them provided me with introductions to his Osaka based tattooist, another traditionally trained tattoo artist. After the interview with this tattooist, he invited me to a tattoo convention in Osaka. This provided me with the opportunity to get more familiar with the tattoo scene in Osaka and talk to a

great number of tattooists and clients of both traditional Japanese and other styles of tattooing. With constant live performances on the stage however, there were no opportunities for formal interviews. It did add to my insight and understanding of the field however and I found no substantial differences between the Osaka and Tokyo tattoo scenes.

All in all I did about fifteen formal interviews of which four were with tattooists, one both as a client and tattooist, the rest clients of whom only one was a woman unfortunately. However if you were to count all the traditionally tattooed people in Japan I don't think one out of fifteen being a woman is entirely off, though I have no access to any specific numbers or statistics of that kind as no such survey has ever been conducted.

For my final field experience I decided to start a tattooing project on my own. While I had a Japanese style tattoo already and this worked as a good ice-breaker on many occasions, I felt it was a good opportunity to get a genuine traditional Japanese tattoo. Both because I wanted it personally, but also because I felt it might add to my experience of the field. In the end I started a large tebori project on my back at the studio of the tattoo master I had spent most of my research time with. I am very happy I did so, not only because of the splendid artwork, but also because I really do feel that the experience has helped deepen my insights into this subject. I did this at the very end of my stay after completing all my interviews, and I recognized in myself some of the same motivations and subsequent satisfaction as I had heard in my interviews.

Part 1: Historical and cultural aspects of Japanese tattooing

History

There are many aspects of Japanese traditional tattooing that make it interesting and separate it from other forms of tattooing. Its long history is one of them, and it is I believe central to understanding its fascination, public image and position in society, and its international recognition.

One of the things that makes Japanese tattooing stand out in the world of tattooing in general is the fact that they were probably the first to use large scale pictorial designs covering large parts of the body. This probably started in the 18th century, but did not reach its pinnacle until the 19th century. While this may not seem that long ago, something comparable has not taken place in the rest of the world until quite recently. Tattoos in other parts of the world at this time would either be quite simple symbolic or pictorial designs covering single parts of the bodies of sailors and soldiers or tribal tattoos covering several body parts of tribal people. This style did of course not appear out of a tattooing vacuum. As such I think it is relevant to look at its possible antecedents and probable origins.

There are indications of tattooing taking place on the Japanese islands as early as the jōmon period (10000B.C.-300B.C.). The only evidence of tattooing from this period is archeological and quite open to interpretation coming in the form of facial and other markings on the bodies of clay figurines called dogū.





There is no guarantee however, that similar markings were carried out on real life human bodies or if they were, whether they were painting, scarification or tattoos. McCallum though, suggests that it is more likely representations of permanent body markings like tattoos or scarification (McCallum 112-113). Even so, its relation to the tattoo culture discussed in this paper is questionable. It is highly uncertain if not doubtful, that there is any continuity from the jōmon culture to the following yayoi culture (300B.C.-A.D.300) (McCallum 113-115).

The yayoi culture and people however seem likely to be predecessors to the later, historical Japanese people and culture (McCallum 113-115) and as such are perhaps more interesting here. In addition to markings on clay figurines, there is also documentary evidence from Chinese dynastic histories attesting to tattooing taking place on the Japanese islands in this period (McCallum 113-115, Van Gulik 246-251). If this tattooing practice is not a continuation from the jōmon period, then it is most likely reflecting influence from northeast or southern Asia. Whichever is the case, there seem to be little doubt that tattooing did occur on the Japanese islands at this time (McCallum).

In the following kofun period (A.D.300-600) there is also indigenous documentary evidence of tattooing on the Japanese islands. While the historical records Nihon Shoki and the Kojiki were compiled in the 8th century, they both contain accounts of the preceding kofun period. The earlier accounts describe what seems to be socially acceptable tribal tattooing, while the later accounts describe tattooing as punishment, indicating a change towards a view of tattoos as something negative that has continued to the present (McCallum 116-118).

From the end of the kofun period to the beginning of the Edo period (1600-1868), there is little evidence of tattooing. It seems strange however that tattooing should disappear altogether during this period only to reappear again a thousand years later. There are indications of tattooing taking place as punishment or as branding of outcasts during this time (McCallum 118), but one cannot completely ignore the possibility of tattooing also as decoration having occurred during this period. Due to the negative views of tattoos during this period it is likely to have gone completely undocumented however, if it even existed at all. The sudden flourishing of decorative tattoos during the Edo period might indicate some such tradition having survived underground among

certain people though (McCallum 118-119).

The Edo period is when Japanese traditional tattooing as we know it today really came into existence. Exactly how and why though, remains unclear, and the large scale pictorial designs we are mainly concerned with in this paper did not come around until the latter part of the period. The earliest types of tattoo in this period are the penal tattoo, irebokuro (ire-insert, bokuro-mole) and the kishobori (kisho-pledge, bori-carving/tattoo). There are clear records of tattooing as punishment from the governmental records of this period. Following the example of China, the Japanese government started utilizing tattooing, beatings and exile as a more honorable substitution for more severe forms of corporal punishment such as cutting off an offenders nose (Yamamoto 41-44).

Also during this period a tattooing practice started to develop among prostitutes and their clients. It started with the irebokuro, a tattooed mole between the thumb and forefinger. When the prostitute and client held hands, their thumbs would cover the others mole. Later this would take the form of characters like names, love and future on the inside of the arm. These are called kishobori. It is believed that this practice originated as a show of sincerity between the lovers and may have been a way for prostitutes to keep long term clients, ensuring a steady income (Yamamoto 41-44).

Prior to the pictorial designs there were also other character tattoos such as *namuamidabutsu* (I sincerely believe in the Buddha Amida) appearing on the arms of self-styled gallants (ruffians) (Yamamoto 41-44). According to one tattooist I interviewed, this was the first form of larger decorative tattooing that has continued to the present. Two tattoo clients I talked to also reported on grandfathers that took similar tattoos during or after WWII. One of them suggested it was done as a kind of apology. His grandfather was supposed to go into battle, but was sent home due to an illness he did not really suffer from. He later learned that everyone in his unit got killed and tattooed *namuamidabutsu* in remembrance of- and as a prayer for those who died. While he did not say so explicitly, I also got the impression that it was done not just for the dead, but as a way of expressing gratitude for his own survival and apology for not dying with his comrades.

The reason I bring this up here is I cannot help but feel that there might have been a similar motivation behind the *namuamidabutsu* tattoos of the Edo period. This brings us to one of the theories regarding how the pictorial tattoos came into existence, namely to cover up penal tattoos. If this is indeed the case, then it seems to me that a tattoo of *namuamidabutsu* may have been undertaken not just to cover up the punishment of being tattooed, but also the crime itself. While *namuamidabutsu* means *I sincerely believe in the Buddha Amida*, Amida is the Buddhist goddess of mercy and invoking her name can be used as a way of begging for mercy. So in tattooing this, a person may very well have tried to clear their mind as much as their name, apologizing for past sins and getting a fresh start by wiping out not just the shame of the penal tattoo, but the guilt of the crime as well.

Exactly what spurred the move to larger and pictorial tattoos, we may never know, but it seems likely that there were some kind of escalating factor involved, with different groups competing against each other in a race of the flashiest tattoos. In her PhD paper, Yamamoto (p 44-51) cites evidence of something similar happening between prostitutes and their clients. This probably accounts for the move from irebokuro to kishobori. They would take it even further though, donating cut hair and nails to each other, moving on to severed fingers and the double lovers' suicide for the most extreme. She cites evidence from Tamabayashi (1936) for a competitive race of tattooing among the street knights (isamihada, kyoukaku, otokodate) as well. According to this they started with *namuamidabutsu* and similar tattoos in the late 17th century, moving on to pictorial tattoos in the middle of the 18th century Yamamoto (44-51). Roughly at the same time, the Edo firefighters, palanquin bearers and express messengers started to emulate or compete with the street knights, getting similar tattoos. Other tattooed groups include carpenters, laborers and craftsmen. In any case there is little doubt that the practice of big pictorial tattoos arose in the chonin (townsman) culture of the big cities, Edo in particular.

It is not so surprising that the tattoos would find fertile ground in this culture. With a long period of peace and growing urbanization, there arose a culture of its own among the townspeople of the period, with their own theatre (kabuki), pictorial art (ukiyo-e), literature (e-hon, picture books), prostitution and drinking establishments. Called ukiyo (the floating world), this was a world were playfulness and flashiness was admired. Centered on the pleasure districts of Yoshiwara and later

moving in to other areas such as Fukugawa, this was a world of play inhabited by asobinin (playboy, carouser) and geisha.

In this urbanized culture arose also a style of aesthetics and mannerisms called iki, to which any Edokko (genuine Tokyoite) worth their salt aspired. While iki has so far escaped a rigid definition, it can be said to encompass three separate qualities; Hari-a certain coolly gallant manner in defiance of social rank, Bitai-charm, allure, style, and akanuke-an aloof, yet unpretentious air of familiarity with all aspects of life (see Nishiyama p 53-64 for a more detailed account of iki).

So this was an egalitarian world of play and style, where the commoners could escape the rigid feudal social structure of the time. With their own growing wealth and the chance to become part of a cultural elite as much their superiors coupled with the declining wealth of the ruling samurai class, it was also a world very much in opposition to its rulers. With the samurai often being at the economic mercy of the merchants who were technically in the same stratum of society as the townspeople in general, why should they respect the samurai? I would argue that tattoos had iki, and that they were both an escape from and a protest against the social order, being both a display of not caring about the rules and values of their superiors and a symbol of defiance of it. While the samurai recognized the subversive nature of much of this culture and frequently tried to limit or prohibit the practice of it, the townspeople would find ways to hide its subversive qualities or practice it in hiding until the enforcement of the prohibitions slackened. Prohibitions against tattoos were issued repeatedly during this period, only to be repeatedly ignored by the public (Yamamoto p 44-51, Van Gulik 83-85).

It was in this cultural landscape that the first bearers of decorative and pictorial tattoos arose, the aforementioned street knights. Affecting the style and mannerisms of the kabukimono (rebellious former or masterless samurai of outrageously flamboyant dress and boisterous mannerisms), tattoos would suit their style well. Styling themselves as local peacekeepers/law enforcers and supporters of the common man, they would form gangs with territories, organize gambling and probably protection rackets. Some of them may have been former or masterless samurai and may be a continuation of the kabukimono groups. While the yakuza (Japanese organized crime

"families", they call themselves ninkyou dantai - lit. chivalrous organization) claim descent from these groups, proving that connection is another matter (see Poysden & Bratt 2006, Kaplan & Dubro 2003 for a detailed account). Even so, it may go a long way towards explaining their self-image as noble outlaws and protectors of the people. It may also to a certain extent explain the general public image of Japanese traditional tattoos being the exclusive province of the yakuza.

In any case, the tattoo culture of the Edo period seems to have been part of a culture in opposition to authority. One might think that the coming of firemen into the tattoo culture might point in the other direction, but the firemen had a reputation as ruffians rivaling that of the street knights. It was jokingly speculated, which did the most damage, the fire or the firefighters. Add to these groups the laborers, many of which lived from day to day, working by day and drinking by night and you have a nightlife culture of ruffians and others outside or on the fringes of polite society, centered on the pleasure districts, everyone flaunting their flamboyance and competing for flashiness. It seems likely that there will have been a competitive mindset of flashiness spurring the development of larger and more elaborate tattoos. Tattoos were also to be found in current literature, kabuki theatre plays and ukiyo-e.

One development in particular deserves special mention here as most accounts of Japanese tattoo history cites it as possibly the most important influence on the development of tattoos towards large pictorial designs. This was the publishing of the Chinese literary classic, the *shui-hu chuan* (called "the water margin", "all men are brothers" and "outlaws of the marsh" in English translations), in Japanese called Suikoden. It deals with 108 rebellious outlaw heroes in 12th century China. After having been branded as outlaws by corrupt officials, the 108 band together in opposition to the authorities in a mountain stronghold located in a marsh land. Living as bandits, but always acting to avoid harm to the general populace, they hold loyalty and honor in the highest regard, swearing allegiance to heaven and loyalty to the emperor. Or so it is generally presented at least.

Reading it however, it is clear that many of these heroes are far from being just wrongly accused gentlemen. Many of them are indeed hardened criminals and murderers who seem to hold life in little regard. The leaders though, are indeed wrongly accused and it is mostly they who make this

band into an honorable one. Prior to being united however, they all live adventurous lives on the fringes of society and the characters in the book constantly refer to those leading this life as members of the chivalrous brotherhood or gallant fraternity. Several characters in the book, including the leader of the 108, are subjected to exile and tattooing in the face as punishment. A handful of them are also described as having decorative tattoos.

Already one can see clear parallels to the above mentioned tattooed groups of the Edo period, but the Japanese publications make that even clearer. The first installments were published 1727 with another 10 volumes coming in 1759, all translated by Okajima Kanzan. By the end of the century a number of books based on the Chinese classic and its theme became increasingly popular. The real craze however started with the illustrated editions of the 19th century. Between 1805 and 1839 a version with illustrations by the famous ukiyo-e artist Katsushika Hokusai came out. Hokusai also came out with a separate, pure picture book of the Suikoden heroes in 1829. In 1827 another famous ukiyo-e artist, Utagawa Kuniyoshi came out with his own collectable print series called "108 heroes of the Suikoden". While in the Chinese original only a handful of the heroes are tattooed, and relatively moderately so, in the Japanese version and the print series, more and more of the heroes are tattooed, with increasingly complex tattoos covering greater and greater amounts of skin.

As previously mentioned it is easy to see how the flamboyant and defiant street knights, fire fighters and similar groups of rough characters could identify with the Suikoden heroes. It is also easy to see how the prints can have had an influence on the tattoo practices of the same group. The appearance of the Edo period full body tattoo is usually attributed to these print series by most accounts of Japanese tattoo history. As suggested by McCallum, however, it seems likely that the influence was mutual. Just as the townspeople were competing among themselves for flashiness, so the tattoo customers might have competed with the print illustrations for the most daring tattoos, again spurring the ukiyo-e artists to increase the size and complexity of the tattoos in the prints (McCallum 121-122).

It should also be mentioned that the first tattoo artists were probably the ukiyo-e artists themselves, possibly in a similar mode of cooperation as with the woodblock prints, were the

artist would design the image and a carver would carve the woodblocks or the tattoo. The tattoos would probably take the form of both copying the tattoos of the heroes and tattooing images of the heroes themselves. Exactly what kind of imagery was used in tattooing at this time will most likely never be known. The reason for this is lack of conclusive evidence, such as sketches from tattoo artists. This would probably have been handed down from tattoo master to apprentice, but in one of the many prohibitions against tattoos, the police confiscated artist tools and sketches, and consequently erased important evidence of the history of tattooing in Japan. This happened early in the Meiji period.

In the modern period (1868-present) the recurrent prohibitions against tattooing continued. First with the opening up of the country, the Japanese government was afraid of how the new arrivals would react to some of the local customs. The groups of workers who wore tattoos performed hard physical labor in the hot, humid climate of Japan and consequently often worked in nothing but loincloths. Afraid that the foreigners would find the tattoos barbaric and repugnant, the government issued a ban against tattooing.

Ironically though, both foreign sailors and dignitaries found the tattoos fascinating and as such a few artists in important harbor cities were allowed to continue their trade on foreigners. Among the foreigners who got tattoos from Japanese craftsmen at this time, we find such notable persons as the heirs to the British and Russian thrones, George V and Nicholas II.

Despite these prohibitions that were enforced more harshly than during the Edo period, the practice of tattooing among the Japanese themselves did not disappear altogether. It did drive it further underground though, were it has remained until the present day.

This is probably another reason why the tattoo has such a negative image in Japan and is associated with the yakuza, especially with the yakuza rise to power after WWII. While the American Occupation lifted the ban on tattooing, many of the artists had now died without heirs to their craft and the art had already been forced underground. With the increasing number of yakuza and their penchant for tattooing, anyone else wearing tattoos were now not likely to show them in public for fear of being associated with the yakuza and thus being prosecuted by the

police despite tattooing being legal. Only very recently has this started to change.

With the growing popularity of tattoos in the western world in the past 20+ years, tattooing has made its way into the mainstream of western culture with tattoos being very visible on the streets and adorning the bodies of celebrities in magazines and on TV. Following this, the western tattoo has also made its way to the fashion conscious youth of Japan and western style tattoos are now quite visible on the streets of big cities like Tokyo and Osaka. Also there has been an exchange between western and Japanese artists since the 60's that has just increased with the coming of the western tattoo to Japan. The result is that the Japanese tattoo now seems to come into the open more than before. While the yakuza image still persists and most bearers of traditional Japanese tattoos choose not to display their tattoos, they can occasionally be seen on the streets, and frequently on tattoo conventions, rock concerts and other events were subcultural groups gather.

Public image

Tattooing has very negative connotations in Japan and the average Japanese citizen views them with a great deal of skepticism. Many hot springs and other baths have prohibitions against tattooing as do capsule hotels, ryokan (traditional Japanese inn) and many private sports and health clubs. When asked why this is, these places or most Japanese citizens for that matter will reply that it is because of the yakuza. When asked why people dislike tattoos so much, the answer is the same; the yakuza. Only the yakuza have tattoos in the eyes of the Japanese public. This explanation seems too simple and too easy for me however, and I want to take a look at some other factors I think is highly relevant to this negative view of tattoos. I've heard people refer to tattoos as disgusting for example and I hardly think that has anything to do with tattoos being popular among the yakuza. That they would have rules against tattooing to keep the yakuza out of their local bath house I can buy to a certain extent even if it is a quite discriminating practice, but that it makes tattoos in general disgusting doesn't quite follow. It must be a little more complex than merely being associated with the mafia. If we start by looking back to the section on the history of tattooing in Japan, I think we can find part of the answer.

History

As mentioned earlier, tattooing in Japan has had a negative public image since the beginning of the current tradition in the early Edo period. Tattooing was then already in use as punishment, a way of marking criminals and would obviously be viewed negatively. Later it evolved into decorative use among commoners, but these were probably not the most common of commoners, but ruffians and carousers who spent their time in the pleasure districts and rebelled against authority while most commoners probably didn't even dare think about protest. And if that was the case, then they might talk negatively about tattooing among themselves to keep up appearances as law abiding citizens even if they internally were displeased with the social structure and cared little about tattoos one way or the other. And seeing as tattooing was banned repeatedly, law abiding citizens would have to teach their kids to be the same, telling them not to get tattooed and that this was against the law. I would argue that some of these historical elements have been passed down through the generations until it became a more or less integral part of a

generally accepted Japanese mind set.

Neo-Confucianism

It was not just law that shaped this mind set however. In the Edo period one of the most central philosophies to moral, political and everyday thought was Neo-Confucianism. Based of course on earlier Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism was a fusion of earlier Confucian thought with elements of Daoism and Buddhism, creating a philosophical and metaphysical explanation of the cosmos and human beings' relationship to the cosmos. In the Edo period it was integral to the legitimization of government policy and the general workings of the state. One of the most central themes of Neo-Confucian thought is filial piety; loyalty to one's parents because one owes ones parents a debt for having brought them into this world. In Edo period Japan however, this was extended to include ones lord or ones superior. Thus it was central to governing the rigid feudal social structure of the time. It also means however, that your life and body is a gift from your parents and heaven, and thus should be treated with the utmost respect and used to its full potential.

While I doubt many modern Japanese would name Neo-Confucianism as the origin of some of their thoughts, some of its ideas are still clearly evident in Japan today. I have spoken and asked about tattoos on many occasions in Japan, talking to fellow students, friends and acquaintances of different generations, but almost always getting the same skepticism of tattoos in reply, even if they say they think tattoos look cool. While some cites concern with future employment as a cause for not getting tattooed, several have also said that it would be shaming their bodies or that it would be disrespectful to their parents. If I have pushed the matter further asking why it is like that, they most often just reply that it just is that way implying it is some sort of general consensus it is easier just to conform to. A friend of mine from a student group however explained it on more detail, clearly echoing Neo-Confucian thought (translated from Japanese):

"Well, Christians right? You know how there are Christians that see their bodies as a gift from God? And therefore they cannot get tattoos or harm their bodies. In Japan people see their bodies

as a gift from their parents and they cannot tattoo or harm their bodies because it would be disrespectful of their parents."

I think this statement clearly shows how Neo-Confucian thought is an intrinsic part of modern Japanese everyday thinking, and how it contributes to a negative view of tattooing. It also goes a long way towards explaining how someone may consider tattooing disgusting by it being unnatural and an affront to heaven and their parents by being an affront to the natural cosmic order of things. It is just something you are not supposed to do. If you were meant to have tattoos, you would have been born with them.

Prohibitions

As mentioned in the beginning of this section, many places in Japan have prohibitions against people with tattoos. These are generally places where one can expect to encounter people in some state of undress, baths and swimming pools being obvious examples. Mostly this is explained as a way to keep the yakuza out to avoid frightening guests. This seems quite understandable. It is however somewhat problematic. It is quite discriminating and only perpetuates the negative image of tattoos.

At the same time it is quite meaningless regarding the yakuza. I very much doubt they would go into a public place where they knew their presence would bother other guests. It would be an uncomfortable situation for the yakuza as well. Most of these places are places of relaxation or recreation and being eyed with fear is not very conducive to either. These people have their own hang-outs where they are comfortable. Also they are quite concerned with reputation with a self-image of being somewhat noble outlaws, striving for a robin hood like image similar to the suikoden heroes and machi yakko (town protector) of the Edo period. They like to style themselves as protectors of the common man and most have policies about not bothering common people. So even if there were no rules regarding tattoos and they did go into one of these places, causing any kind of trouble would be harmful to their reputations and their business.

As such these prohibitions are quite pointless I believe. They are also very discriminatory, lumping all tattooed people together in a group of criminal outcasts. Having a traditional Japanese tattoo has never in actuality been synonymous with being a yakuza member. Sure they may be the single largest group having such tattoos, but they have never been the only one. When these prohibitions include other kinds of tattoos as well, even the tiniest butterfly on a western woman's shoulder, justifying it by saying that limiting it to just one type of tattoo would be discriminatory, it gets a little silly. I think such misconceived policies are also a very important reason why there are such negative attitudes towards tattoos in Japan. There really is no place for it in a modern Japan where more and more young people are getting tattoos and extensively tattooed sports stars and celebrities are looked up to in the media. Would they bar David Beckham from entering their local bath house?

In the end these prohibitions are just catering to a discriminatory view of tattoos and perpetuating their negative image while doing nothing positive to anyone, but instead letting these misconceptions live on in the minds of those who do not know any better. I would argue that this negative image is mostly public image however and doesn't necessarily reflect the actual thinking of the average Japanese citizen. I think many people, at least in great urban centers, have relaxed their view on tattoos.

In Tokyo for instance, all public swimming pools now allow entry to all people regardless of tattoos. Going to my local swimming pool in a quiet neighborhood outside the center of Tokyo for the first time during my last stay in Japan, I was somewhat anxious. I didn't even bother to bring swimwear the first time; I just wanted to check if they allowed people with tattoos to use the facilities. When asked, the receptionist just replied that yes that was no problem; I would be more than welcome. I had to double-check; even if it is a big Japanese style tattoo I asked. She just smiled and said no problem, welcome back. Only one woman in the pool was somewhat uncertain of my tattooed presence and sent an elder man over to ask if I was in the mafia. He smiled and rolled his eyes when he asked. When I asked him if there didn't use to be prohibitions in Japan, he said that that was just in the old days and in the countryside, in big cities like Tokyo it was no problem.

But people who don't frequent swimming pools aren't aware of this however. They still think it is not allowed and as such, that most people still think tattoos are a bad thing. Thus they will be careful about getting tattoos or being positive about them in public.

Following my experience in Tokyo, I assumed that Kyoto would be the same. It was not. As soon as my tattooed arm appeared inside the actual pool area an attendant came running over waving his arms. He went on to explain that tattoos were not allowed. When I asked him why, he just replied that it was a rule. Wanting him to admit to it being due to the yakuza image so I could explain its folly to him, I asked him why it was a rule. Repeatedly. But he continued to reply it is just a rule and got visibly embarrassed. He never mentioned the yakuza, but mumbled something about tattoos upsetting the elderly guests. Clearly enforcing this rule was a little embarrassing to him, he realized that it made no sense.

I think it is a strong indication that these rules do not accurately reflect Japanese people's current opinion about tattoos. It shows that these regulations help construct and perpetuate a negative public image of tattoos.

Fashion

While these negative opinions about tattoos persist, there has also been a change in the recent years as mentioned above. Western style tattoos and tattoo shops begun entering the scene in the 90's and their number has increased dramatically over the past 10 years. They have become part of fashion, subculture and youth culture, and they are starting to enter the mainstream culture as they can frequently be seen on the streets in large cities and adorning the bodies of celebrities in magazines and on the screen. This development is undoubtedly related to a similar development in western culture. While I won't treat that development in detail here, detailed accounts of this has been made by other scholars, Margo DeMello (*Bodies of inscription*, 2000) being a good example.

DeMello explains how tattoos have made the move from working class culture and subcultural

groups to the middle class and popular culture. This development has just continued since the publishing of aforementioned book with tattoos now having fully entered the mainstream culture and society in many western countries. In Norway for instance tattoos now hardly raise more of a glance than a piece of jewelry or other fashion item. While the development hasn't come this far along in Japan, it is certainly well along the way. Tattoos are now to be seen on young hipsters, artists, punks and subcultural groups that are becoming as commonplace as to possibly being considered popular culture. Even salary men and students can occasionally be seen with tattoos in cities like Tokyo. Japanese sports stars as well are now getting and displaying tattoos publicly like their western counterparts.

Needless to say this does affect people's perceptions of tattoos. They are unquestionably becoming more accepted by people in general and society at large.

It is however limited to the big cities. There is also still a distinction between Japanese style tattoos and other styles, and between Japanese people with tattoos and foreigners. When asking around, many people told me they didn't think twice about foreigners with tattoos, but that they would have been skeptical about a Japanese person with tattoos, especially if it were traditional Japanese tattoos. If I asked why, they would reply that they would be afraid they might belong to the yakuza.

I only found this attitude among people with no relation to tattoos however. People with tattoos or people with friends who had tattoos did not seem to hold the same view of traditional Japanese tattoos, indicating that they to a certain extent coexist in the same cultural environment with other tattoo styles.

Whether this will result in Japanese tattoos entering the fashion world remains to be seen. The traditional tattooists seem to resist this move however, seeing it as a diminishing of the authenticity of their craft (Yamada, 2009). Regardless, it may still make traditional Japanese tattoos more acceptable and less stigmatized in the long run.

Appearance in culture

Despite the prevalence of negative attitudes towards Japanese tattooing throughout the history of Japan, there also seems to be a fascination with it in Japanese culture. It makes its appearance in numerous works of literature, the movies, and Kabuki plays.

In certain kabuki plays one of the most dramatic moments can be the revealing of a tattoo by one of the main characters. While kabuki plays and picture books such as the suikoden have been important in creating an image of tattoos in the minds of the Japanese, these were more relevant in the Edo period. That is not to say that they no longer play a role. They are still a part of Japanese history and Japanese culture and any Japanese citizen will have at least a passing familiarity with kabuki plays if not ukiyo-e and the suikoden. Also, I am sure that the particular type of drama to be found in kabuki has had a lasting impact on Japanese drama in general and is reflected in contemporary television dramas of the Edo period, of which there are many. Their inclusion of the sudden revealing of a tattoo as a dramatic turning point has probably influenced the Japanese fascination with tattoos. These displays generally have a certain intimidating effect, showing an unexpected side of the character, perhaps a show of strength, connections to a segment of society not expected of the character or erotic allure.

Tattoos also appear in Japanese literature, making an appearance as early as 1682 in Ihara Saikaku's *The life of an amorous man* in which one of the main characters tattoos the name of the other on his arm as a sign of devotion. Several other authors have dealt with tattoos in their work, including Okamoto Kido and Mishima Yukio to name a few well known examples. The most notable though is undoubtedly *The tattooer* by Tanizaki Junichiro, a short story from 1910. This is a well-known work in Japanese literature by one of Japan's most significant writers. Set in the pleasure quarters of Edo in the 1840's, it tells the story of a master tattooer and his search for the perfect female client for his master piece tattoo. When he finally finds her and tattoos her, his tattoo completely transforms and empowers her, turning her into a seductive femme fatale of unparalleled beauty. Surely this story has been an important factor in contributing to the image of Japanese tattoos as erotically appealing and something quasi magical that bestows unusual powers on its wearers. McCallum (125, 128 and 132-133) makes this same argument and couples

it with the appearance of tattooed men and women in popular erotic literature and lower-class motion pictures. I would also argue however that this story probably just echoes already existing ideas about Japanese tattoos at the time of writing and that it has been a factor in keeping these ideas alive in the minds of the modern Japanese public.

A more recent writer, Tendo Shoko, writes about her childhood and adolescence growing up the daughter of a Yakuza member. She relates an unusually hard life with drugs, abuse and violence and attributes her eventual recovery to her getting tattooed in the traditional Japanese style describing it as a feeling of empowerment and retaking control of herself (*Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster's Daughter*, 2007). This sort of description fits with the image of Japanese tattoos as something that bestows power, but also with stories of peoples tattooing and body modification experiences in general. We will look more closely at this in the theory section and in my accounts of the people I interviewed during my field research.

Public image in western society

Contrary to the negative image in Japan, traditional Japanese tattoos are held in high regard in the west. Many tattooists and appreciators of tattoos in the west consider the Japanese tattoo to be the epitome of the art of tattooing. While the Japanese tattooist considers himself to be a craftsman, in the west they are frequently thought of as the most skilled and artistic tattoo artists in the world. Japans most famous tattoo master Horiyoshi III is by many considered to be the world's most famous as well.

While many are aware of the yakuza image, few know little beyond that about the Japanese tattoo culture. Like in Japan it is surrounded by an air of mystery. Many (myself included prior to taking on this project) thinks they are fraught with important symbolic meaning, giving them a spiritual quality.

DeMello (p74-75) argues that this perceived spirituality in Japanese tattooing was essential for tattoos to make the move into the middle class and popular culture in the west. When Japanese tattooing started to influence western tattoo art, this gave tattooing a certain spiritual aspect that

made it more acceptable to the middle class she argues. As the middle class required some justification in order for tattooing to be acceptable, this spirituality provided that justification to an American middle class demanding sophistication in tattoo art in order to accept it.

In any case there is little doubt that Japanese tattooing has made an important global impact on tattooing as an art form in general. And this I argue is an important aspect of Japanese tattooing today as it gives traditional tattooists in Japan a legitimacy among non-traditional artists and consequently possibly also among the consumers of non-traditional tattoos and eventually maybe even the average citizen.

Technical and practical aspects of the traditional Japanese tattoo

Some mention should also be made of how this craft is learnt and practiced, as both require considerably more dedication on the part of the practitioner than the western styles most of us are familiar with. I also believe they are an essential part of the tattoo experience and as such also important to how the clients perceive themselves and their tattoos. I will start by explaining a little bit about the apprentice system.

As mentioned earlier, truly traditional Japanese tattooing is taught in a traditional master and apprentice relationship. While western tattooists also may apprentice to a shop or a more experienced tattooist, it is none the less not the same as in Japan.

The way of teaching and learning that occurs in the Japanese system is one that has been practiced in the same way for centuries. I am unsure exactly how far back its roots stretch, but its current form can definitely be traced back to the early Edo period or earlier for certain arts such as No theatre. According to P.G. O'Neill it probably has its origin in the clan structures of the Yamato state before the 8th century (*Organization and authority in the traditional arts*, 1984). This system is called the iemoto system.

While I've never heard a tattooist refer to it as such, hearing or reading their accounts of their apprenticeships, I am convinced it must at least have been influenced by this system. Normally referred to in dealing with arts belonging to the samurai class such as No theatre, flower arranging or the martial arts, with the flowering of chonin culture during the Edo period it also came into use there, with kabuki theatre being one example of an art belonging to the chonin segment of society formally organized according to the iemoto system.

While chonin arts and crafts would have been learnt by apprenticeship earlier also of course, I think the popularity of the iemoto system during the Edo period would have made many such crafts adopt similar practices even if they were not formally recognized as iemoto systems, ukiyo-

e and tattooing probably being among them. According to Nishiyama, the iemoto system allowed the chonin to partly escape the rigid class structures and provide them with some authority and elevated status, hence its popularity (Edo culture p 5).

In any case the central features of this system are that it was organized as a family household with the iemoto being the head of the house and having all rights to the teaching of and income from the practice of the art. Advanced students would be able to take students of their own and put on their own performances, but always under the auspices of the iemoto. The iemoto would also grant stage names and eventually pass on his own name to his eldest son or a favored student.

There is a very similar structure in tattooing. Often they are organized along similar family structures and they may also refer to themselves as a family, using the name of the household head as a kind of family name. Most tattooists' names in Japan begin with Hori (meaning carving) and end in another character. So for instance a tattooist might have a business card reading Horisan of the Horisama family (fictive names, san and sama being ways of saying Mr. at different levels of politeness). Here also the head of the house will pass on his name to his son or most senior pupil. So the previously mentioned Horisan might one day succeed his master to become Horisama II.

The way of teaching and learning is also very much the same. There is very little explaining, mostly just learning by praxis. Usually a student will begin by just aiding the master in his tasks, doing menial chores and watching the master work. This may last for years even. Gradually however, the pupil will be asked to copy sketches, aid the master in the actual tattooing process and tattoo the simpler parts of a tattoo, slowly building their level of skill by its practical application until they can one day take customers of their own and finally open their own shop and take an artist name of their own.

I don't know of any studies comparing this way of teaching with other more modern ways (it would be worthy of a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation of its own I think), but I think it imbues the students with a deep intuitive understanding of their art that cannot be copied by other forms of learning. It is as if the lessons bypass the brain, plugging itself directly into the spinal

column and nerve system. They learn to draw and tattoo any particular design in exactly the same manner as their master, but being different individuals in different bodies, there will invariably be slight differences in execution. It is as if they become different living embodiments of a tradition of drawing and tattooing in a particular way.

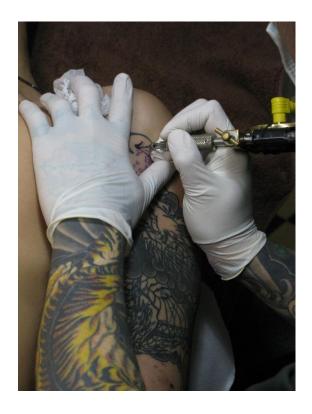
While I can cite no studies of pedagogy, aesthetics or other relevant academia to support this, I am convinced this imbues their art with their individuality, giving their artworks life in a way they could not have had the skill been acquired in any other way. This mode of learning is also to be found in other Japanese traditional arts and practices however and accounts from exponents of such arts may offer some support to my claim. One such account is Karl F. Friday's explanation of kata practice in traditional Japanese martial arts. Here also the learning is through praxis, with theory being intuited by the student as much as explained by the teacher, the ultimate goal being to free oneself from the training and becoming a living embodiment of it so to speak (See Friday p 102-108 for a detailed account). Also I believe this is part of its central charm and perhaps the main cause of its air of spirituality and its persistent fascination in the west. Originally, it was probably just the scale and complexity of the designs, but over time one gets over this novelty value and become somewhat blasé. However people continue to be blown away by the same designs over and over. Western artists with an interest in Japanese tattoos never seem to be able to stop praising their traditionally trained Japanese colleagues. Their art must have some quality that a copy lacks in order to keep on fascinating people so, and I believe my account of it above is at the heart of it.

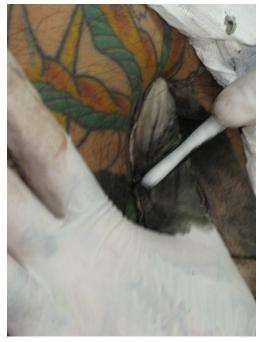
There is another aspect of Japanese tattooing that also cannot be copied and that perhaps is part of its fascination. In any case it deserves mention to make clear how Japanese tattooing is executed in practice. Traditional Japanese tattooing is made by hand, rather than with a tattoo machine. The instrument consists of a long stick, like a long chop stick or paint brush, with needles attached at the end. The number of needles and their arrangement depends on what sort of tattooing is being done, whether it is lining, coloring, shading etc. The tattooist then stretches the skin surface to be tattooed between thumb and index finger with one hand, and holding the tattooing instrument in the other, supports it on the thumb of the stretching hand, jabs at the skin injecting ink beneath it with each jab. The process is quite fast, and is only slightly slower than a

machine in the hands of a skilled practitioner. Mostly though the outlining of the tattoo is done by machine, and then the coloring and shading is done by hand. The hand technique is called tebori. Currently tebori sees less and less use as most customers prefer the faster machine work to get the most value for their money. Also, the number of artists capable of doing proper tebori are dwindling it seems. In the old days the tattooist would make his own tools and mix his own colors. After WWII however, exchange between Japanese and western artists changed this. The western artists would send tattoo machines and color in exchange for sketches from the Japanese artists. Some of the colors used before contained toxic substances, so now Japanese artists all use the same industrially made non-toxic colors as their western colleagues. Many of those that practice tebori however still make their own tools.



Above: Tebori technique. Below: close up of tebori and machine tattooing.





Most traditional Japanese tattooists see themselves as craftsmen practicing their trade, rather than as artists practicing an art form and they tend to be quite humble about themselves and their work. On several occasions I tried to sound out tattooist opinions as to their work being art, but they adamantly refused to consider it as such. Only when I asked if they wouldn't agree that quality craftsmanship includes a certain amount of artistry, would they reluctantly agree. I quickly noticed however that their clients treat them with a noticeable amount of respect, always using polite speech (-desu –masu form) even when they are very closely acquainted or if the client is senior in age. They also frequently address the tattooist as sensei (master, teacher) and sometimes bring gifts for their sessions. While the relationship varies from client to client, the relationship frequently seems quite close.

Several of the clients I talked to reported companionship as being one of the sides of getting tattooed that kept them coming back, and I sometimes heard them talk about their personal lives with the tattooist who in turn seemed genuinely interested and would respond encouragingly. Calling it a therapy session is taking it a little far, but there definitely seemed to be something

therapeutic about it, with clients letting their guard down, airing out personal issues and leaving a little brighter than when they came. In any case it is obviously a quite personal experience.

The tattooist's place of work probably adds to this experience. The traditional tattooists rarely operate out of the type of street front tattoo shops with big signs advertising their trade that we are familiar with from western countries. They usually operate out of a rented apartment or a separate room in their own home. Located in quiet neighborhoods and surrounded by other houses and apartments, they are completely anonymous. While some now advertise their business in tattoo magazines, many still require an introduction from another customer to gain access. This I would argue adds to the air of mystery surrounding the Japanese tattoo and the sense of privacy of the experience.

The downside of this system of teaching is that it is a grueling process and as such rather intimidating or unappealing to aspiring young tattooists today. Few see the point of this old fashioned system, resulting in a fewer new apprentices and some apprentices dropping out. This is perhaps the biggest challenge for Japanese traditional tattooing today. If this system of teaching disappears, there is a danger the tradition will lose all its traditional aspects apart from imagery and style. On the upside however, western interest has resulted in a few western tattooists completing an apprenticeship, and there seem to be a growing interest among modern Japanese artists as well, hopefully resulting in a resurgence of recruitment.

Part 2: Psychological aspects

Theory

In this section I will explain the theories and findings regarding body modification and self-mutilation behavior as detailed in *Bodies under siege, self-mutilation and body modification in culture and psychiatry* by Armando R. Favazza (1996) as this will be the most significant part of the theoretical framework for my discussion of my research findings. I chose this particular work as I find this type of theory to touch on something very essential to the understanding of body modification practices such as tattooing and it is the most thorough treatment of this subject that I have found. I also find it to be the most appropriate theory to approach an alternate understanding of my initial hypothesis for this paper.

If you will recall I mentioned that I initially wanted to uncover some of the mystery regarding Japanese tattooing and its possibilities for being viewed as a sort of talisman bestowing certain powers on its bearer. While I have found little direct evidence to support this in my interviews, there is reason to believe it is not without merit. Richie (1981), van Gulik (1982), Tendo Shoko's (2007) personal account, Tanizaki's *the tattooer* (1910) and the stories related by the tattoo masters in Yamada's (2009) article all point in that direction. I don't find them to be sufficient in and of themselves however. By coupling the stories of regular tattoo customers from my own interviews with Favazza's theories however, I can show how a similar effect can be seen among contemporary tattoo customers in Japan while at the same time provide a theoretical framework for understanding how the notion of talismanic value can have arisen and indeed actually work as intended.

While Favazza makes little mention of tattooing specifically, much of what is accounted for in the book is still relevant to tattooing as I will demonstrate here and in the following section. I'd also like to mention that while there will be much mention of self-mutilation here and one might wonder what that has to do with tattooing, keep in mind that tattooing does involve deliberately subjecting yourself to injury and as such, strictly speaking, is a form of self-mutilation.

Favazza categorizes self-mutilation in two main categories with their own separate subcategories,

so I will begin by listing them for ease of reference and understanding before I go on to explain each category. I will only cover in detail those categories of interest here though, and just give a simplified definition of the others.

Culturally sanctioned self-mutilation

Rituals

Practices

Deviant-pathological self-mutilation

Major

Stereotypic

Moderate/superficial

Compulsive

Episodic

Repetitive

Of interest to us here are of course culturally sanctioned rituals and practices, which would include most forms of body modification such as tattooing, piercing and scarification, but also moderate/superficial episodic self-mutilation. While tattooing is not pathological as such, I find the explanations of this category to be useful here. It is the mildest form of pathological self-mutilation and as such the one closest to culturally sanctioned self-mutilation. I would argue that the two might be seen as the two ends of a scale of the same self-mutilation behavior, with culturally sanctioned in one end and deviant moderate/superficial in the other. In the middle we would find drastic body modifications such as tongue splitting and the extremes of piercing and milder moderate/superficial self-mutilation such as infrequent cutting or burning. In any case the two categories are sufficiently close that inferences can be made from moderate/superficial self-mutilation to body modification in general and tattooing specifically.

Culturally sanctioned self-mutilative rituals and practices

Culturally sanctioned is pretty self-explanatory, so I won't explain that any further here except to say that while tattoos in Japan may not be culturally sanctioned by Japanese culture in general, it is still sanctioned within its own culture and in any case not seen as pathological by definition. Rituals and practices require a little more explanation however as the two can be difficult to tell apart. In the words of Favazza: Cultural rituals imply activities that are repeated in a consistent manner over at least several generations and that reflect the traditions, symbolism and beliefs of a society. Circumcision of Jewish males is an example of a culturally sanctioned ritual. Circumcision of non-Jewish people however is a culturally sanctioned practice. Cultural practices imply activities that may be faddish and that often hold little underlying significance according to Favazza. Body modifications like piercing and tattooing are examples of culturally sanctioned practices. The Japanese tattooing of the late Edo period can easily be called a practice, but can also be argued to have been a ritual given its existence over several generations and reflecting the traditions and symbolism of a certain groups in the chonin segment of society. Selfmutilative rituals, and in some cases practices, serve to prevent the onset of- and correct or cure destabilizing conditions such as angry gods, immoral or sinful behavior, interclass conflicts, loss of group identity and distinctiveness etc. according to Favazza.

Major pathological self-mutilation

This category covers the extremes of self-mutilation such as self-castration, eye enucleation and the amputation of limbs and is of no relevance to us here.

Stereotypic pathological self-mutilation

Monotonously repetitive self-mutilation of which the most common is head banging; not the type performed by heavy metal music fans, but constantly banging one's head against a wall for instance until it results in injury such as bleeding, seizures etc. This category also has no bearing

on our treatment of tattooing.

Moderate/superficial pathological self-mutilation

As it says this type of self-mutilation is moderate and or superficial and can be subcategorized according to the frequency of occurrence. Typical types of this category are hair pulling, picking, scratching, cutting, burning and carving of the skin. The behavior is compulsive if it occurs many times daily and is repetitive and ritualistic. Episodic means it happens every so often and the self-mutilator has no self-identity as a "cutter" for instance. They do not lament this behavior; it is just done to make them feel better. It relieves some sort of feeling of distress or otherwise makes them feel better. Episodic self-mutilation becomes repetitive when the behavior becomes so frequent as to be almost autonomous and the self-mutilator may adopt an identity as a "cutter" and describe themselves as addicted to the behavior. As mentioned to begin with, among the pathological self-mutilative behaviors, episodic moderate/superficial is of the most interest to us here as tattooing also involves self-mutilation by making a multitude of tiny wounds in the skin through which ink is then inserted. Both are also used to make one somehow feel better about oneself and has a certain therapeutic value. A lot of the feelings, diagnostics and explanations for this behavior is echoed in the descriptions some tattooed people give of themselves and their reasons for getting tattooed, but we will look more closely at that in the next section.

Research findings

Early on in my research I got the sense that I was on the wrong track. Looking for tattooing as a sign of group membership or the use of tattoos as a form of talisman, I was in my first interview told these notions were old fashioned. That was more in the old days and tattooing as group initiation was just a yakuza thing, these days people did it because they thought it was cool; that it was fashionable. I could not however entirely shake off my initial ideas, thinking that such

extensive tattooing as the traditional Japanese style that would be hidden most of the time would have to have some deeper psychological founding than mere fashion. So I started thinking that fashion is perhaps a form of self-improvement and as such might have a similar effect as a talisman giving you some sort of power, that also being a form of self-improvement. If nothing else it would protect you from being average and grant a certain coolness and individuality. Perhaps there were some similar psychological mechanisms at work in these two different reasons for getting tattooed; whether one would get a tattoo as a talisman or for beautification, perhaps the principal psychological cause is much the same. In my second interview I quickly found that there was. I also found indication that my first notions might not have been entirely wrong, but that those types of motivations for tattooing was rarer these days and as such harder to find and research, so I decided to try to look for both in my interviews and then combine them. I think these quotes from my second interview with a tattooist are quite illustrative of what I have found.

On the topic of Japanese tattoos as art, the tattooist replied the following (translated from Japanese):

Personally, regarding my own work, regarding it being art, I don't think it is, but inserting that work into a person's body to go on living, until death, living, I think that person (in the condition of being tattooed) is art. ... When they live on together, that's art. ... Maybe art's not right, but if my work can somehow support them in their way of life. ... I mean human beings have some complex right? Something insufficient... something they desire... If my work can just make a small contribution (to alleviate that insufficiency)... I mean you want to live on in a cool way right? Don't lose right? Ever!

So you somehow help fix people a little? So that's why they call you (tattooists) sensei. Like a doctor. You fix people? In their hearts?

Yeah, we..., yeah, something like that. I mean, I can't perform anything mysterious or anything, but...

From there the conversation drifted, but returning to the topic later he said:

I mean I don't ask directly but, they seem to seek something they can do, to be more easy-going...

Or more... Well, tattooed people are... they're broken somewhere. They suffer somehow I think.

So to fix that?

Depending on the tattooing they come to fix that... Well, they don't say I want to fix this or that, or that they want to be like this or that, but many come to get tattooed for that purpose I think.

I think this clearly indicates the similarities between tattooing as cultural practice and self-mutilative behavior such as cutting in that they both have therapeutic value. In my subsequent interviews I would continue to look for indications of this and try to find out if they had had any particular problems that they sought to address by getting tattooed and if so, what they were. I tried not to steer the conversations directly in that direction, but would let them speak freely about tattooing and then try to find something in what they said from which to go in that direction. I would also ask about their background, when they started getting tattooed and why. Asking about family relations and growing up also gave results. As much of these topics are rather private subjects, many were quite close lipped and revealed little. Others though would speak freely and answer pretty much any question directly and I found quite a lot that supported my theories.

While the people I spoke to were very varied in background, occupation and lifestyle all seemed to live somewhat on the fringes of society in general in some way. Most were from working class backgrounds and neighborhoods and if I include all the people I talked to and not just the ones I interviewed, working class backgrounds and blue collar jobs, especially construction jobs were by far the most numerous. Many of the Tokyoites were from the shitamachi area, where the pleasure districts were in the Edo period and Japanese tattooing has much of its roots. Some however ran successful businesses of their own, one was a designer for a well-known Japanese clothing brand and some were musical artists.

Among the motivations for getting tattooed that were revealed, many of them spoke of getting

tattooed as a kind of promise to themselves, something to live up to, something to give them power, luck or fortune among those that spoke of it directly and explicitly. Among the others I found many indications of some troubled past or a need for some kind of empowerment or self-improvement. I will go through the statements from the interviews that pertain to the subject and then using the appropriate explanations from Favazza, see how they also can be used to explain the motivations of the people I interviewed.

The quotes from the tattooist above clearly indicate that many tattoo clients have some sort of internal conflict that they seek to address and moderate through tattooing, so let's take a look at some of these.

Several of the people I interviewed talked of their tattoos as something to live up to or as a promise to themselves not to fail at something. I think this may be indicative of a failure to live up to one's expectations or fear of it.

A 29 year old company manager I interviewed spoke freely and in detail about his tattoo, a large dragon on the back. He started getting tattooed at age 22. On asking him on his choice of motif, he explained that he had wanted something that displayed his abilities and that would last a lifetime. I then asked him what those abilities were and what exactly the dragon tattoo meant to him. He explained that the abilities were power and ambition. He explained further that power was not just personal power, but the power to help others and that by ambition he meant not just the ambition to succeed, but equally the willpower to not give up in the face of the adversities of life. He explained further that the tattoo, as it lasts a lifetime, was a sort of promise to himself; a promise to live his dreams, and a wish that his dreams would come true.

I think in these statements, there is a fear; a fear of not living up to his own desires and expectations. In the process of getting tattooed he has to endure considerable pain, spend great amounts of money and time, and the tattoo can never be removed. While he never said so explicitly, I think it is implicit that this requires dedication and that the process of tattooing is a way for him to demonstrate his dedication to himself. If he can be dedicated enough to go through the tattooing process, he can be dedicated enough to pursue his dreams and keep trying

even when the going gets tough. It can be seen as a preventive measure to avoid the disappointment and anger that would follow if he were to fail to live up to his expectations. Favazza (p273) explains how self-mutilation is used to relieve anger at oneself for not living up to ones expectations. In this case they've already disappointed themselves, are angry at themselves and the self-mutilation serves as a safety valve. It relieves the negative feelings and prevents them from getting out of hand. The tattooed person however nips the problem in the bud so to speak by facing their fears and preventing this situation from ever occurring, or at least tries to. They are a step ahead of themselves.

The 34 year old clothes designer I spoke to explained his reason for getting tattooed somewhat differently, but I believe it speaks to much the same motivations.

So I can't return to the ordinary. Only this work ... I can't return ... determination ... there's nothing but this (job) ... I can't escape.

He implies he can't return to an ordinary line of work. The tattoos make it impossible to get a "normal" job as he has tattoos that would be visible even when wearing a suit. Again it is a promise to himself, much like in the previous example. But they both also speak of gaining strength from it.

Yamada quotes a tattoo client with similar motivations. Having previously failed in business, he gets tattooed upon making a second attempt at starting a business. He does it to prove his strength and bravery, and he says he cannot lose confidence again as he can't shame his tattoo and that he feels he has the strength to endure any difficulty (Yamada 328). In this case he clearly has a history of failure and a reason to be afraid of disappointing himself again. While the two people mentioned to begin with made no direct mention of any such history of personal difficulty, I believe it must have been there.

Another man I interviewed however spoke quite freely of his troubled past. A 38 years old parttime guitar player and construction worker, he was an easy-going and talkative guy. He told me he started getting tattoos at age 20. A friend of his had bought a tattoo machine and all the guys let him give them freehand tattoos (tattooing directly on the skin without stenciling up a removable design first). He then told of his boss who had a full body suit tattoo and was also a mafia member. He would pretend to feel warm and take off his shirt to show his tattoos to everybody on the construction site. He did this to show his toughness/willpower (気力) and prevent arguments with other groups of workers I was told. I then asked him if that was why they started getting tattoos too, to be like him. He told me that he grew up under tough working class conditions in a rough neighborhood with divorced parents and very little money and that this was when it actually started.

At that time everybody were Yankees you know? You know Yankees?

(Yankee in Japanese can be used as slang for delinquent young people with blond dyed hair and American style clothing; typically sneakers, jeans and varsity jackets. Often members of a youth gang. Originated in the 80's)

Yeah...

Well everybody wanted to be tough right? We'd tattoo ourselves with needles and ink from pens when we were bored in class. In the breaks we'd put out cigarettes on our bodies to act tough and show strength (気力). So that's why we started getting tattooed for "real" too...

He went on to tell me that after a while he didn't like the "real" tattoos his buddy had made and started coming to this studio to get professional tattoos. They'd known each other since adolescence, so that's how he knew where to go. I asked him if there was anything other than showing strength or pain tolerance that made him get tattoos or if he wanted to get something more from it.

Foreigners, right? People from other countries you know? They just want the tattoo NOW. They want to finish as fast as possible. When it comes to Japanese they want to tattoo just a little at a time. Japanese come for the company too. And to have something to look forward to. You understand company?

After looking it up in my electronic dictionary, I understood. He spoke fast, used a lot of slang and words that would never come out of the mouth of a regular Japanese person, so he was concerned I might not get everything. Like he said: "even Japanese people don't understand what I say" which he promptly demonstrated by bubbling up a fountain of slang at the tattooist who just looked baffled Mostly due to the speed of it I think though. "I'm a construction worker you know. We make the yakuza seem polite and clear" (The yakuza are known for their slurred speech and foul language). He was nonetheless very good at communicating. He picked up on pretty much every time I didn't quite get what he said and would take his time explaining with more common words.

He went on to tell me that he never really showed his tattoos to anyone. Even though his family and many co-workers knew about his tattoos, he always wore long sleeves. Only his wife ever saw his tattoos. He went on to tell me a lot of other things not related to tattooing and most of it not fit for print.

He was quite a character.

I found it interesting that he never showed his tattoos. For while he never spoke of anything directly indicating some sort of need for self-improvement or otherwise doing something for himself by getting tattooed, that must still be what he was actually doing, I think. He talked only of tattooing as showing strength, but if you don't show the tattoos, then who are you demonstrating your strength for but yourself? Unlike the previous quotes, there doesn't seem to be the same kind of promise to yourself involved here or a fear of failure or blaming oneself. This is still self-improvement though. Maybe there is a feeling of insufficiency or a need to fix a character flaw, like weakness for example. Favazza speaks of this (p276) also as mechanism involved in self-mutilation.

Many of the people I talked to spoke similarly of desiring strength, power, determination and enduring hardship. I asked many if they felt different after getting tattooed, or if they felt these desires were fulfilled. While most didn't say things were that different and as such one might conclude that it didn't quite work, I'd rather say that this is a preventive measure of sorts, or of healing by coming to terms with one self, or of having something to aspire to. In that regard,

despite not being able to report feeling different, it might still work. In one case however, I got a very clear answer from a 30 year old boss for a call center. When I asked him if the tattooing made him feel different, he said he felt better, stronger and that he was doing better at work. He said he felt that things were going better as he was more motivated and he felt good as the tattoo gradually became complete.

This could also be taken to support my initial talisman idea. From the quotes and accounts above, one could very well conclude that the tattoos of these people do indeed work as a talisman for strength, luck, success, good fortune or power.

While many can't come up with stories that fit with the above, but say they only do it because it is cool or they like it, I am sure that there is some similar mechanics going on in the background in any persons decision to get tattooed. But we cannot discount the possibility that someone does it purely for beautification. Though again beautification in itself may again involve some of the same mechanics. Beautification is also self-improvement after all. There is also the possibility that they just take things for granted and thus don't reflect much on the topic. One of the last persons I interviewed, a 24 years old truck driver from the shitamachi area in Tokyo hardly said anything at all. He answered all questions very briefly and to the point as if there was nothing more to say. "Yes, no, because I think they're cool. What's cool about them? They look good." The conversation generally went something like that, so I asked him if he felt cooler then.

No, not especially...

Proud?

Not really...

But don't you feel it makes you a little different from "regular" people somehow?

Not in particular...

The conversation kind of died out with neither of us saying anything. After a while he said that a lot of the people where he lived were tattooed, so it wasn't such a big deal upon which the tattooist butted in and said that there were probably more people with than without tattoos there. In such a setting it is not so strange not to have that many thoughts on the subject. If you are truly

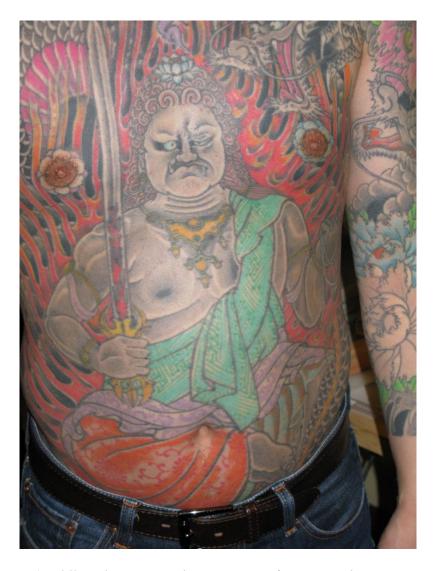
part of a tradition, you may just take it for granted and not reflect on it. It is just how things are. I think that was the case for him. He was part of a long working class tradition and people didn't make that much of an issue of it. It would be an implicit sign of group membership in such a setting though. I didn't think about that until much later unfortunately, so I never got the chance to ask him. But I remember the same tattooist told me something about this in another conversation.

I was talking to him about my previous notions about tattooing when we came to the subject of tattoo appreciation societies. He said his master might know someone and that he could check. I asked him if he knew what sort of people such a society would be comprised of, but he said he had no idea. Maybe traditional workers like tobishoku (traditional Japanese scaffolding construction workers) he suggested. Naturally I wanted to know more. He told me that this was perhaps the most traditional customer group of the Japanese tattooist and far more significant than the yakuza to Japanese tattooing. This profession had been there from the early days in the Edo period. They are in fact so significant as to determine the general price of a tattooist's service. He told me there is a tradition for the price of one hour of traditional tattooing to be equal to a tobishoku's payment for one day's work. Other tattooists I have talked to later have confirmed this tradition. Naturally payment may vary in both occupations these days, but tobishoku salary still determines the average price. He also told me he knew of tobishoku customers of colleagues of his that had long standing family traditions of tattooing going all the way back to the Edo period. He didn't manage to get me introductions to any of these, but I hope I might manage that in the future.

Now that we are back to the Edo period, I want to make a small suggestion about application of Favazza's theory to the tattooed Edo period commoners as well before we move on to the conclusions.

If you will recall they lived in a rigid hierarchal feudal social structure in which they were at the very bottom and that with their growing cultural and monetary affluence, they felt out of place in it. I think it could be argued that this could be a similar case of anger or protest in the form of body modification as Favazza points out (p273). Whereas anger with society or institutions may

lead someone to cut or burn themselves in Favazza's accounts, it might have led Edo period commoners to tattoo themselves to relieve anger and protest against society. Perhaps more interesting though, would be to see it as a culturally sanctioned ritual. As Favazza says, such rituals can be used to cure or heal a group's destabilizing conditions; such as interclass conflicts. Instead of acknowledging samurai rule, the Edo commoner could voice his protest and escape to a world of geisha, kabuki, ukiyo-e and tattoos.



Above: Fudo Myoo (Buddhist deity, a popular tattoo motif) picture taken at tattoo event in Tokyo

Conclusions

While there seems to be a slight change in the public image of tattooing in Japan, the negative image from the past still persist, pushing the practice of tattooing to the margins of society, with the majority of tattoo clients being construction workers and other working class groups, and certain service professions and artists. This is especially true of traditional Japanese tattooing and as such its position in society remains much the same as in the Edo period. It seems the main challenge for traditional tattooing is keeping the old apprentice system intact. There does seem to be a growing interest among modern style artists in taking up the tradition however, and as such there does not seem to be an immediate danger of this intrinsic aspect of traditional Japanese tattooing disappearing.

I therefore claim that the Edo period traditions of tattooing are still very much alive in modern Japan even though traditional tattooing is now fading in and blending with the scene of western tattooing and fashion. The traditionally tattooed in Japan today are still rebellious commoners and noble outlaws as they were in the Edo period. They are still on the fringes of mainstream society not quite fitting into the normal social structure. While McCallum claims that explaining traditional Japanese tattooing by saying it is conforming to non-conformity is too easy (McCallum p 132), I'd say it is not entirely off either. Nobody ever really conforms. Everybody's just a little bit different from everyone else and only by conforming to your own non-conformity can you find peace with yourself. Or to say it a little differently; only by coming to terms with your own shortcomings or flaws can you overcome them. I hope I have demonstrated that tattooing can do that for you. It could in the Edo period and it can today. Whether you see it as a magical talisman that gives you a strength you didn't have or as painful time- and money consuming ordeal that gives you the determination you need to overcome your obstacles, it can and does work. And while the psychologists and psychiatrists from the 50's and earlier saw tattooing as a symptom of mental illness of some kind, I claim it is a cure. Said another way; the same psychological factors are the cause of both. Whatever troubles you can make you tip over the edge if it gets too far. In some cases like those Favazza details that can lead you to harming yourself in some way to alleviate the suffering and keep your troubles in check. On that scale of being troubled, tattooing is a step ahead of just plain hurting yourself. It can keep you from tipping over the edge. It can be therapy. And I'd say that traditional Japanese tattooing studio is better equipped to do that a little better than the normal western style tattoo shop. First there is the very private nature of the tattooing sessions. It is just you and the tattooist, usually for about two or three hours at a time once or twice a month over a period of years. The relationship can hardly avoid getting somewhat intimate over such a long time. At the same time the relationship is professional. You know the tattooist isn't going to gossip to others and there's a safe distance between the two. The client can go on with his life when the session is over. This is getting quite similar to the relationship between a modern therapist and client. But there were no therapists in the Edo period, there were tattoo masters. And there were their tobishoku clients. They are still there today. They are not the same as they were then, but they are not all that different either.

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Afterword

I can perhaps attest to some of the above through my own tattooing experiences as well. I can definitely attest to having had many issues of one kind or another. I've frequently found myself in some sort of conflicting state. I will certainly attest to the drive and expectations not always matching up and feeling the need to take it up a notch. I think this has been part of the reason for my getting tattooed. I can't say that it is of direct or immediate help, but somewhere along the line you kind of come to terms with yourself. You lower your expectations and up your drive a little so they are more evenly matched and you stop going to war with yourself. You may still do battle on occasion, but the war's over. I think it has something to do with the daunting prospects of a tattoo's permanency. Each time I've gotten tattooed, I've had subsequent doubts. Was it the right one? Should it have been placed differently? Colored differently? Etc. The answer is no it shouldn't because it isn't. You can't really afford yourself such doubts because that would just be too severely disappointing. Especially with a Japanese tattoo. It is just too darn big! If you didn't like it, disappointment doesn't quite cover the emotion you would have. It HAS to be cool. And so do you. And if something that big is cool, it follows that the coolness matches the size.

Upon my tattooist's suggestion of a motif, I immediately liked it. But we were drinking and everything was good. Thinking about it afterwards, I was unsure. I liked it, but was it right? In the end I thought, well you will always wonder about that regardless of the motive, so just go for it. And I did. I had doubts after getting the lines for it too though; but the guy on my tattoo dies in the original story! That's his death scene on your back! Does that mean I am going to die? Of course you are. Everybody dies. That's a dramatic high point in the whole story. He saves the day. He is a hero and so are you! I like it now. No, I love it! I can't wait to see the rest of it gradually fill out. And I have to say something was just a little bit more right in the world afterwards. Coming home, a lot of pieces in my puzzle fell into place. I thought; is it because of the tattoo? I know there were many reasons why things came together for me. Maybe they are as much reason for me getting tattooed as well, instead of the other way around. Maybe coming to terms with

something in myself made me able to sort my life a little and getting the tattoo solidified it. Made it real and visible. I don't really know. But I can't shake the feeling that there's something there...



Above: My own work in progress. Same motif as on the first pages. Tattoo and photo by Horitoku IX

Summary of master thesis in Japanese studies

Title: Japanese traditional tattooing in modern Japan

Contents:

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the contemporary practices of Japanese traditional tattooing are a living continuation of its practices in the past Edo period and post war era through the 80's

It does this by focusing on the motivation for getting these tattoos and their function as a talisman or other self-empowering device and the social position of both the practice of tattooing and the people who get tattoos.

It is mainly based on independent field research in Japan, including interviews with traditional tattoo masters and their clients but also on scholarly and documentary material concerning Japanese tattooing, scholarly material on tattooing in general, and on Japanese culture.

It covers most aspects of Japanese tattooing including history, cultural aspects, technical and practical aspects, Psychological theory and individual aspects. It also includes a few photographs and images.

The writer also hopes it is an enjoyable read.