



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

Hugvísindasvið

# **Yakuza**

*History of the Yakuza*

**Ritgerð til BA prófs í japönsku máli og menningu**

**Kristinn Árnason**

**Maí 2014**

**Háskóli Íslands**  
**Hugvísindasvið**  
**Japanskt mál og menning**

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**Kt.: 190790-2319**

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this essay is to examine how the Japanese mafia, the *yakuza*, came to be. Before I started writing this paper, I did not know much more than the general public about the *yakuza*, so I wanted to find out a bit more about them, for example whether there were any groups in the past that were similar to the *yakuza* today, and whether these groups might be considered the ancestors of the *yakuza*, or whether a point of origin could be found in their history. I will chiefly research two groups, the *bakuto* and the *tekiya*, as the main groups which might have merged and become the modern day *yakuza*. I will also look at three other groups that might have relevance to the *yakuza*. Although these groups do have considerable importance for the development of the *yakuza*, they are more likely to have merged with the two main groups before they turned into the *yakuza*.

As well as looking at the origins of the *yakuza*, I will also research these groups' inner workings and the characteristics of their members, such as the incredible loyalty they have to each other, the way they self-amputate their fingers as a form of apology to their boss, as well as the tattoos that are heavily associated with the *yakuza*.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
1. Introduction.....	4
2. The Yakuza's Origin .....	6
2.1 <i>Bakuto</i> , the Gambling Groups.....	7
2.2 <i>Tekiya</i> , the Cheating Street Vendors.....	9
2.3 <i>Burakumin</i> , the Untouchables .....	10
2.4 <i>Kabuki Mono</i> , the Crazy Ones .....	11
2.5 <i>Machi Yakko</i> , the Village Defenders .....	12
3. The Hierarchy of the Yakuza.....	13
3.1 <i>Oyabun</i> and <i>Kobun</i> : Father and Son-like loyalty.....	14
4. The Common Characteristics of the Yakuza .....	15
4.1 Loyalty of the Yakuza.....	16
4.2 Yubitsume .....	17
4.3 Yakuza Tattoos .....	18
Conclusion .....	19
Works Cited .....	22

## 1. Introduction

*Yakuza* is the name given to organized crime syndicates in Japan. The term *yakuza* is preferable to gangster, because the latter, which refers to members of street gangs, is much too broad a term to describe the *yakuza*, which are sophisticated syndicates (Siniawer, 2008: 5-6). It is difficult to say how many *yakuza* exist, as their actual numbers are unknown, but according to some sources, they are organized into approximately 2,000 gangs, while other sources say there are about 3,000 gangs, most affiliated under a few conglomerate gangs. There is no single theory regarding their origins, as the *yakuza* consist of many groups, some of which claim to be the original organization. The *yakuza* today do not agree concerning their origins: some believe they originated in groups of gamblers, while others believe scam artists were their predecessors. Others believe that out-of-work samurai were the ancestors of their group, and some of them believe their ancestry was a bit more noble, originating with groups of people that defended towns against these unemployed samurai. Many of the *yakuza* trace their roots back to *Ronin* (masterless samurai) and often adopt samurai-like rituals (Merriam-Webster, Gragert, 1997: 147). Another possible origin for the *yakuza* is seen in bands of good Samaritans who defended villages against the *Ronin*, who had turned into bandits.

Today, the *yakuza* engage in extortion, blackmail, smuggling, prostitution, drug trafficking, gambling, loan sharking, and day-labour contracting; and they control many restaurants, bars, trucking companies, talent agencies, taxi fleets, factories, and other businesses in major Japanese cities (Encyclopædia Britannica).

I would like to examine these divergent theories: this essay will focus on how they emerged and what the origin of the *yakuza* is, rather than focusing on the *yakuza* as they are today, because I am fascinated by the way the Japanese public views them, the way the Japanese public seems to have respect for the *yakuza* because of their past, instead of looking at them as criminal groups. It is my contention that the *yakuza* originated from all of those groups, most notably the *bakuto*, which gave today's groups their name, the *yakuza*. It is likely that each of these groups contributed their own customs and traditions to the formation of a whole new organization; that all these groups merged and formed the *yakuza* as we know it today. Their name, *yakuza*, may have originated in the gambling groups called *bakuto*, but the term has acquired a new meaning, it no longer carries the meaning "useless person." The word *yakuza* has come

to mean an organized crime group or groups. This essay will also look at the good things the yakuza have done for Japanese society, and why they, as a criminal organization, help Japan in times of need. It is true that the yakuza have been of great help during disastrous times in Japanese history, but is that because they care about Japanese citizens, or because they want people to overlook the bad things they do at the same time as they reinforce their Robin Hood-like status in society, as criminals who do good?

This essay will examine the origins of the yakuza, the way the yakuza hierarchy is set up and the reasons why they have managed to grow so much in Japanese underground society. Is the Japanese public even aware of how large this organization has become, and if they are aware, do they care? What is their view of these men and women of the Japanese mafia: are they to be feared, or are they to be admired like heroes?

## 2. The Yakuza's Origin

"Like the Mafia in Italy, gang traditions that are still influential today in Japan had their origins within the feudal structure of the preindustrial society." (De Vos, 1973: 281)

As a professor of anthropology, De Vos says above that the roots of the yakuza, and indeed most crime syndicates, lie far back in the past. The motivation for the foundation of most crime syndicates is the provision of protection, although they can expand their activities to a range of goods and services, both legal and illegal, such as gambling and drugs (Skaperdas, 2001: 174).

According to Kaplan, the Yakuza seem to be the living embodiment of samurai, even though they have cast away their swords and robes and now wear business suits. They have put themselves into the roles of Japan's noble warriors, protecting the traditional values of the nation, and the Japanese public seems to have accepted them as some sort of patriots, some of them even becoming legends and having the same status as Robin Hood does today (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 21, 29).

Uchiyama says the people of Japan used to have a less negative attitude toward the yakuza, they used to think that they were not a good group, but that they were necessary for their daily life. However, after the Anti-Boryokudan law passed in 1991 -- *boryokudan* meaning violent groups -- public opinion started to change and become negative toward the yakuza (Uchiyama, 1997: 473).

Professor De Vos, however, is of the opinion that in all complex societies, people look back to heroic legends that are part of the common lore: the innovator, the outlaw, the rebel, the deviant; that these are universally popular legends which glorify defiance of legitimate authority, and are seen as justification for deviant behaviour in the present (De Vos, 1973: 280).

The history of the yakuza is filled with tales of Robin Hood-like individuals who bettered their lives and those of others by living the life of an outlaw with dignity. These tales are the heart of the yakuza's self image and the public's perception of this group. The police and scholars try to challenge the connections between these stories and the yakuza, or the authenticity of these stories, but the Japanese public still considers Japan's organized crime groups as having a noble past (Gragert, 1997: 149).

Jason Krigsfield is of the opinion that the yakuza fall under the category of *makoto* heroes, *makoto* meaning sincerity or purity of motive. They are devoted to traditional values, they are not usually logically motivated, and they have an unwavering moral code (Krigsfield, 2010: 5-6).

*Shinobu Tsukasa*, the current leader of the *Yamaguchi Gumi*, which is one the biggest, most powerful yakuza groups today, said in an editorial in the newspaper run by the *Yamaguchi Gumi* that they were not, as the police claim, a violent group, but that they were a humanitarian organization which helps Japan in times of crisis. And they have indeed helped Japanese citizens on numerous occasions, such as in post-war Japan, and after the 1995 *Hanshin* earthquake that devastated Kobe and surrounding areas (Adelstein, 2013).

The origins of the Yakuza are not entirely known, but it is believed that they formed around the mid-Tokugawa period (1603-1868). They might have emerged from shady merchant groups (*yashi* or *tekiya*), or gambling gangs (*bakuto*). The word yakuza is thought to have been derived from gambling: *ya*, *ku* and *za* standing for the numbers 8, 9 and 3 respectively, which add up to 20, a score that was no good in a game called *hanafuda*, where a player is dealt 3 cards, and his score is the last number in the sum of those 3 cards, so if you got 20 your score would be 0, and the winner was the one who got 19 or closest to 19. The word later took on a new meaning outside the gambling world: people who were no good or useless were called yakuza (De Vos, 1973: 282-283, Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 36).

## **2.1 *Bakuto*, the Gambling Groups**

The *Bakuto* were referred to as the core of the Japanese organized crime groups by Tokyo criminologist Hoshino (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 36). They gave the country its hugely popular tradition of gambling, the custom of cutting off fingers, and the first use of the word yakuza. The word was used by gamblers as an expression for something useless, but it was later turned against them, meaning that they were useless to society. Considering that the origins of the word yakuza lie with the *bakuto*, one might assume that they are the true yakuza. The word was once limited to *bakuto* gangs, and there are still those in the criminal underground society in Japan today who insist that the only true yakuza are the traditional gambling groups. However the word yakuza has evolved, and now most organized crime groups in Japan are associated with the yakuza (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 36).



The *bakuto* started with a scheme set in motion by the government, their intention being to swindle pay checks back from their construction workers. They recruited all sorts of people -- from outlaws to farmers -- to gamble with the workers, giving the gamblers a cut of the profit they made from the workers (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 35). They later began setting up camps close to busy roads, which were similar to hotels. People who stopped there could not only get a place to stay, but also a chance to gamble (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 36). As the *bakuto* were territorial, they became quite proficient at fighting and violence, in order to protect their businesses and property (Siniawer, 2008: 12).

But *bakuto* weren't just gamblers; they were criminals, and according to history professor Eiko Maruko Siniawer, the *bakuto* were experts at violence and were recruited to fight in the *Boshin* civil war of 1868-1869, because they were better at fighting than the samurai, who had been weakening during a period of inaction. Later, in 1880, the *bakuto* became participants and even leaders in the most violent phase of the Freedom and People's Rights movement, thereby entering the political field (Siniawer, 2008: 7). In 1884, the poor people's army was founded, and it launched an attack on those they considered responsible for their poverty. The self-proclaimed president and founder of this group was called *Tashiro Eisuke*, and he was also a *bakuto* member. This was the beginning of the *bakuto* entering the national political stage. They were not the old *bakuto* anymore. The collapse of the *Tokugawa shogunate*, the turbulent early decades of the *Meiji* period, the decline of the samurai, and the emergence of democratic politics changed them from simple gamblers into something more like the *yakuza* we know today (Siniawer, 2008: 11)

They developed rules such as secrecy, a ranking system and obedience to the *oyabun-kobun* system. Members could get promotions based on their performance in fights and in gambling, but the loyalty to the *oyabun* also had a huge impact on whether they got a promotion. If a gang member broke the rules, severe action was taken to ensure that others would be afraid to do the same. For the worst offenders, there was the death penalty, and the second worst punishment was expulsion. If a person was expelled from the group, the boss would inform rival gangs, and the person expelled would not be able to join any other gang after that. This tradition has survived and is still in practice with today's *yakuza*. The *yakuza* custom of *yubitsume*, or cutting off of fingers or parts of fingers, although a known practice in Japan at the time, originated with the *bakuto*. It was a way to punish members who had done something bad, but who did not deserve the death penalty or expulsion. The finger would be cut off at the first joint of the little

finger; repeat offenders would have their little finger cut off at the next joint or at the first joint of the next finger. This was a way of weakening underlings and making them more dependent on the boss. Sometimes the finger would be cut just before expelling a member from the group. As an additional punishment, he would then always be identifiable as a gang member in the eyes of the public (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 36-37). As the *bakuto* grew in numbers, it became more and more important for them to exercise violence against rival groups, in order to protect and expand their territories. This complicated their relationship with the local authorities and led to them being labelled violent groups (Siniawer, 2008: 21).

## **2.2 *Teikiya*, the Cheating Street Vendors**

One of the theories of the origin of the yakuza is that they originated from a class of street vendors called the *teikiya*. The *teikiya* were originally groups of medicine merchants who later branched out and started to peddle other goods and to engage in criminal activities. According to a theory set forth by professor Jacob Raz, the *teikiya* were one of the two groups that later formed the yakuza, the other group being the *bakuto*. However, these were not just ordinary street vendors; they had more in common with snake oil salesmen in Western countries, as they often sold faulty goods that looked good until subjected to further inspection. They would lie about the quality of their products and act drunk to get people to let down their guard (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 33; Raz, 2002: 211). A speculation of mine about the origins of the yakuza is that people who were considered outcasts by Japanese society were welcomed to this group of people who had also been shunned by society, and that they managed to grow because they always retained the image of an underdog in the eyes of the general public, and were also seen as preservers of Japanese customs. Although Japanese society is often considered a sedentary community, regarding travellers of all sorts, including vagrants and nomads, as suspicious characters, branding them as outsiders of sorts, the country's history is filled with examples of itinerant groups and people, some of them criminals, but others being priests, merchants, peddlers, merchants, and performers. According to the research of Jacob Raz, distinguishing between these groups proved to be quite difficult due to the fact that their activities tended to overlap, and some members belonged to more than one of these groups. (Raz, 2002: 210-211). Although the *teikiya* operated within the same territory as the *bakuto*, both of these groups were happy with their own businesses, so they left each other alone and operated in their own areas

without much conflict: the *bakuto* kept to the highways and towns, while the *tekiya* did their business in street markets and at fairs (Gragert, 1997: 151). They took control of booths at market fairs, and because the boss had complete control over these booths, he decided who was allowed to sell their goods and even what goods would be available. He would charge more for rented space than he was paying in rent himself, charge a protection fee, and then pocket the difference. The protection wasn't really protection as much as insurance that the gang would not mess with a trader or his stall; however failure to pay would lead to the gang stealing your goods, frightening customers away, or even in physical attacks against a vendor. This extortion tactic is well known among gangs and mafia-like organizations and is still practiced by various gangs and criminal organizations around the world today (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 34). For example, when the American mafia started, its number-one moneymaking scheme was exactly this type of extortion: offering businesses "protection" in exchange for money, and the mafia would destroy a merchant's business if he did not pay up (Benson, 2009: 15).

Like the *bakuto*, the *tekiya* also adhered to the strict *oyabun* and *kobun* system. The home of the *oyabun* served as the headquarters for the gang, and as a training centre for new members. The new members, once they had been deemed worthy by the *oyabun*, would be ordered to go out and peddle goods for the *oyabun*. If they were successful, they would become full members of the gang (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 33). However, unlike the *bakuto*, the *tekiya* mostly did legitimate work, which led the authorities to increase the power of their bosses. In an effort to reduce widespread fraud and turf wars among the *tekiya*, the government made a number of *oyabun* into supervisors of the gangs, allowing them the dignity of a surname and two swords, which was as close to samurai status as they could get. With this status, the gangs began to expand, starting to organize fairs of their own. They put on festivals, where they sold food, gifts, house wares, and whatever else might attract a buyer. Despite having been sanctioned by the government, these gangs were still criminals. They took in people who were not welcome in other places, such as wanted criminals, fugitives and even the *burakumin* (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 34).

### **2.3 *Burakumin*, the Untouchables**

The *Burakumin* are Japan's ancestral class of outcasts, a status that still adheres to those of *burakumin* ancestry. It has been theorized that the origin of the *burakumin* was people who were assigned to work with dead animals and dead bodies, occupations that

were considered unclean by the general public. It was for this reason that the general public called them *eta*, meaning heavily polluted or *hinin*, meaning non-human. The samurai discriminated against the general public, so this class of people was discriminated against heavily by the samurai and the public. They were placed together in small settlements, and moving in and out of those settlements was difficult. They were branded with special identification marks, such as yellow collars, and marriage with members of other classes was forbidden. Those who broke the law or were born into a family of *burakumin* were also branded as such, and once you became a *burakumin*, there was no getting out. Many of these *burakumin* joined the *tekiya* gangs as a means of escaping poverty and disgrace, and the *tekiya* gangs were the only place where they were accepted as workers and humans, instead of being branded as untouchables, or non-humans. Legally the discrimination against them ended in 1871, but they continue to be abused to this day, and this drives many of them into the hands of the yakuza (Kaplan & Dubro 34-35). In a press conference with an ex-member of the Public Security Intelligence Agency, Mr. Mitsuhiro Sukanuma said that he had often spoken with Mr. Takayama, second in command of the largest yakuza group, the *Yamaguchi Gumi*, who had told him that out of all the yakuza groups' members, who number 80,000-90,000 all in all, about 60% come from this outcast group of *burakumin* (FCCJ, 2006).

#### **2.4 *Kabuki Mono*, the Crazy Ones**

When samurai lost their masters in battle, many of them became bandits, looting towns and the countryside while wandering around Japan. Traditionally, they would do this until they were taken into the army of the feudal lords who were fighting for dominance in Japan (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 28). Until they were accepted, they often sought to support themselves through violence and looting. During this time, they frequently formed bands of bandits (De Vos, 1973: 283). However, after *Ieyasu Tokugawa* unified Japan in 1604, bringing about an era of peace, there was no longer a need for the samurai. Many of the samurai had to become merchants, civil bureaucrats, scholars, or philosophers. But not all of them managed to merge into society; the samurai were after all men whose best skills lay in being soldiers and practicing the martial arts (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 27). These warriors became the *kabuki mono*: they started to don outlandish costumes and adopt strange haircuts, their behaviour was bizarre, they used a lot of slang in their speech, and they would terrorize townspeople at will. They carried

swords of ridiculous length, which they sometimes used to engage in *tsuji giri*, which was the practice of cutting a passerby in order to test a new sword. These samurai, who had been forced to retire, formed the legendary criminal gangs of medieval Japan known as the *Hatamoto yakko*. They created eccentric names for their groups, such as *Taisho Jingi Gumi*, which translates as "The All Gods Gang." They displayed unusual loyalty amongst themselves and swore to protect one another under any circumstance (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 27). This all sounds like the yakuza of today: merely ruthless thugs who run the underworld of Japan, but that is not how the yakuza view themselves. For them, their history is an honourable one, a history filled with various tales of how the yakuza comes to the aid of the common people, rather like Robin Hood. Their heroes are victims of society, who despite everything they have been through, have made good in the world, living the life of an outlaw with dignity. And indeed, the Japanese public thinks of the organized crime groups in their country as groups that have a noble past (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 27). Many of the yakuza deny that they come from these groups of *kabuki mono* and instead identify themselves with the historical enemy of the *kabuki mono*, the *machi yakko* (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 28).

### **2.5 *Machi Yakko*, the Village Defenders**

The *machi yakko* were bands of young townsmen who organized in order to fend off the increasingly frequent attacks by the outlaw samurai. The townspeople cheered on these *machi yakko*, all of them glad to see fellow commoners stand up to the samurai, and these town servants became folk heroes. Today, the yakuza see themselves as honourable outlaws, and have chosen to look at the *machi yakko* as their spiritual ancestors, but it is difficult to find a direct connection (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 28).

These *machi yakko* owe their reputation to legend, rather than their deeds and the stories in which they are customarily portrayed as heroes and champions of the weak. Japanese theatre owes much of its early development to the depiction of both the *machi yakko* and the *kabuki mono* (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 29). The most celebrated story of the *machi yakko* is one that bears similarities to the origins of the *bakuto* gangs, the tale of *Chobei Banzuinin*. It is the story of a man called *Chobei*, who became a labour broker, recruiting workers to build the roads surrounding Tokyo and to repair the stone walls around the shogun's palace. Making use of a scheme that would become a yakuza mainstay, he started running a gambling den alongside his labour brokering work. The result of this was that it attracted more workers and also enabled him to retrieve a portion of their

salaries (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 29). It is difficult to make a historical connection between the *machi yakko* and modern day yakuza, because both the *kabuki mono* and *machi yakko* had disappeared by the late 17th century due to repeated crackdowns by the *shogunate*.

### 3. The Hierarchy of the Yakuza

The power structure of the Yakuza is in many ways similar to that of the Italian mafia in the sense that the boss is at the top and rules the family with the assistance of his underboss and counsellor. Below them in rank are captains who run crews of men who have not officially been inducted into the mafia. According to Josip Kregar, a writer for the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Security*, combating organized crime groups such as the yakuza is not just about fighting individuals or individual criminal behaviour, and he says it is impossible to fight organized crime by eliminating only the most powerful figures at the top of the pyramid, as these positions will simply be filled by other members of the group, and the police and judiciary do not have enough power and authority to compete with organized crime groups as long as there is a lack of political will to fight crime. He goes on to explain that increasing the efficiency of the government is a far better way to eradicate organized crime groups (Kregar & Petričušić, 2010: 367-368).

In addition to the major yakuza groups, there are also about a 100 minor gangs working under them which pay their respective yakuza groups their monthly association fees. Some of these minor yakuza groups began as simple coalitions of professional gamblers which were similar to the old *bakuto* groups, and then there were other illegal operators. The *Inagawa Kai*, for example, has 22 groups in local governments and they are managed by a corporate board, which determines the position and title of each member and the status of each group under them, and the chairman of the board is usually the most powerful person in the group. Other groups, like the *Yamaguchi Gumi*, one of the largest yakuza groups, began their operations as an association of labour unions for dock workers.

What almost all of these groups have in common is the way they are structured, which according to Jake Adelstein, who was a reporter for Japan's largest newspaper, *Yomiuri shinbun*, is very similar to a pyramid. The *Oyabun*, a boss who is sort of like a father figure to the other members, sits at the top of the pyramid, and the boss that

answers to him has control over less powerful bosses, who have control over less powerful bosses and so on (Adelstein, 2010: 67).

### **3.1 *Oyabun* and *Kobun*: Father and Son-like loyalty**

Similar to the Italian Mafia, the yakuza began to establish families, with a godfather called *oyabun* at the top, and new members were added to the clan as older brothers, younger brothers, and children. As the *bakuto* gangs increased in size and became more organized, they started forming families called *ikka*, based on the ties between the boss and his henchmen.

In the boss' home, which is the gang's headquarters, there are pictures of the great godfathers and an illustration of the family tree of that particular group. However, one unusual feature is that these connections are always made through adoption rather than through blood ties. To this structure, the yakuza also added the system of *Oyabun* and *Kobun*, or father and son. The *Oyabun*, or father, provided his "child" with advice, protection, and help, and received the loyalty and service of his "child" or underling, which is perhaps a more fitting term (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 31, Siniawer, 2008: 20).

This system had been prevalent in 18th century Japan: between teacher and student, between lord and vassal, and then in the growing underworld, between the boss and the follower. This relationship is a copy of the typical Japanese family, where the father of the household was treated with the utmost respect and authority and had power over the future career and marriage prospects of his children (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 31).

A similar concept in western countries is that of mentor and protégé, although a bond between a mentor and a protégé is not as strong as that of an *Oyabun* and a *Kobun*. However, this system is found not only within the ranks of the yakuza, it can be seen in political parties, social movements, the military, and in business. In these fields, the meaning of the relationship between an *Oyabun* and his *Kobun* is treated far less seriously than in the past and might now be closer to the relationship between a mentor and a protégé. In the yakuza, this relationship has remained unchanged. The *Kobun* will go to extreme lengths to honour his relationship with the *Oyabun*, they will kill for him, and even kill themselves for his sake. If a man disobeys his boss, he can expect to be severely punished, on the other hand if he is obedient and complies with the rules set forth by his boss and other bosses, he can expect promotion and financial rewards. A *Kobun* who has only recently joined can expect to be in the front line in fights,

essentially serving as a shield against bullets aimed at his *Oyabun*, and sometimes even taking the blame for a crime the *Oyabun* had committed, and going to prison for them. This system and their loyalty to each other is what has made them into the strong organization that they are today (Kaplan & Dubro, 1986: 32-33; Uchiyama, 1997: 471).

#### **4. The Common Characteristics of the Yakuza**

Unlike other organized crime groups, in modern times, the yakuza do not conduct their business in secret. They are public figures who have office buildings, business cards and even fan magazines (Adelstein, 2010: 65). Almost all yakuza members are easily identified as such due to their heavy use of tattoos, the way they talk in slang, and the way they have self-amputated one of their fingers at the joint. Recently however they have begun to get rid of this stereotypical yakuza look in favour of tailored suits and a clean-cut appearance that could fool anyone into thinking they were just businessmen from any regular boardroom. The third generation leader of the *Yamaguchi Gumi*, *Kazuo Taoka* was in power from 1946 to 1981. He was a brilliant and charismatic leader who managed to win the public's affection. He believed that holding down a job, in addition to being a yakuza, helped the *Yamaguchi Gumi* expand into the financial and business world. Due to the police crackdown on the yakuza, recruitment of new members has taken a considerable dive in numbers, which is why they have started branching out of their traditional business, such as extortion, loan sharking, and protection rackets into everything from insider trading to funding business start-ups, as there is a lot more to be gained from manipulating stocks than extorting businesses (Adelstein, 2013; Hiyama, 2013).

*Kyoko Hasegawa*, writer for the *Japan Times*, wrote an article explaining one of their methods for gaining public esteem, after the public's image of them had suffered a gradual decline due to periodic crackdowns on organized crime groups in Japan. After these measures by the government began, the number of yakuza members dropped to less than 60,000 in 2013. That membership count was an all time low, the first time such a drop had been seen on record, according to the police.

In the 2008 edition of the Japanese National Police Agency's (NPA) annual report on crime in Japan, the police stated that many yakuza had become stock traders and were very proficient in manipulating the stock market. This stems from the fact that in the 1990's, the *Yamaguchi gumi* leader *Masaru Takumi* had set an example for a new path for the yakuza, one which is called the economic yakuza, and that these new yakuza



would now have to read the business section of the newspaper every day. This move by the yakuza from the old fashioned crime rackets such as drugs and prostitution to the new practice of financial market manipulation alarmed the NPA, which warned that this would become "a disease that will shake the foundations of the economy." In 2010, the NPA started sharing their lists of companies which were known to be yakuza-controlled (Adelstein, 2010: 65-66).

#### **4.1 Loyalty of the Yakuza**

One of the defining characteristics of the yakuza is their unwavering loyalty to one another, especially on the part of lower ranking members toward the higher ranking figures. This trust in one another has sometimes been broken and resulted in some members being imprisoned. In a survey where yakuza members were asked if they obeyed their boss, only about 56 percent said that they would unconditionally obey every command their boss gave them 25 percent said that they would only do what they were told if they were convinced that what they were doing was right 13 percent of them said that they could not predict how they would react in the future 4 percent gave other reasons as their answer; and 2 percent were not available. In the drug business, so many members are needed to keep the business going that it stands to reason that not everyone can be trusted; some of them are just street thugs who are not even a part of the yakuza: This puts the yakuza members who have to deal with them at some risk of exposure. However, the reputation of the yakuza keeps most of these thugs too scared to try anything that goes against the family, such as revealing names or betraying family members, because the thug would then be shunned, having no further contact with the family, and he could also expect retaliation, both inside and outside prison (Tamura, 1992: 107; Uchiyama, 1997: 472).

According to an interview with an anonymous member of a yakuza group, he was shocked that he had been arrested during his most successful period as a distributor of stimulant drugs, because his customers were gang members who were affiliated with his family or other groups that were friendly with his family. He had not even imagined the possibility of discovery and getting arrested as a dealer, mainly because of the fact that within the yakuza, it is strictly forbidden to disclose family matters to outside sources, especially the police. However, he was found out and arrested, because someone in whom he had placed his trust had given his name away (Tamura, 1992: 105-106).

The *Yamaguchi Gumi* is one of Japan's most powerful yakuza groups, around 27,000 members strong. But this strong bond of loyalty seems to hang by a thread and is apparently highly dependent on the leader of each group keeping the rest of that group in check. After the boss of the *Yamaguchi Gumi*, *Shinobu Tsukasa*, went to prison in 2005 for possessing weapons, the *Yamaguchi-Gumi* deviated from his ideals. After *Shinobu Tsukasa's* second in command, a man by the name of *Kiyoshi takayama*, took control, the group became considerably more savage and brutal. They started hiring detectives to spy on police officers and gather information on their enemies; they broke their agreement with the police to stay underground, out of the public eye, by appearing in front of the cameras at a live sumo match in 2009, as if implying that they could do whatever they wanted, and that the police could not stop them. They intimidated and even killed people who stood in their way in the stock markets. They burned down a club that could not pay them their protection money, killing one employee, and that led to them being sued by the victim's family, which set an example for the courts to use in similar cases later. The fact that their boss had gone to jail seemed to give them the impression that they were free to do whatever they wanted, which was not good for the group as a whole; it seemed to turn them into a ruthless mob, rather than an elegant organization that follows its principles to the letter. After *Shinobu Tsukasa's* release in 2011, he announced that he would lead the group back to its roots, making it a group that communicates with the public and has an uneasy alliance with Japanese society, rather than ruling over Japanese society by fear (Adelstein, 2013).

## 4.2 Yubitsume

*Yubitsume* is the act of cutting off one's little finger as a sign of apology or as a punishment for violating the yakuza code. The member must cut off his own finger without any help, so as to make it more difficult to perform, and thus straying from the path of the yakuza is less desirable. It is not only a one-time punishment; if the offending member does something worthy of punishment again, he must cut off the finger once again at the next joint. Yakuza members may seek medical assistance after the act, as it can lead to haemorrhaging or infections. In 1993, a survey found that 45 percent of modern yakuza had undergone the *yubitsume* punishment (Bosmia, A. et al, 2013: 1).

This punishment was thought up by the *bakuto* as a means of getting gamblers to pay their debts: It also serves to make the offender more dependent on his boss, as

handling weapons will become increasingly difficult with every offence. Today, the yakuza prefer to work in less conspicuous ways, which is why *yubitsume* is not as popular as a punishment as it used to be. The preferred punishments now are shaving off a person's hair, monetary fines, temporary imprisonment, and temporary expulsion. However *yubitsume*, among other punishments, is still used for more serious offences (Bosmia, A. et al, 2013: 1-2).

### 4.3 Yakuza Tattoos

Another way of identifying yakuza members is their intricate and beautiful tattoos. Tattooing was used by the military dictators of Japan from 1192-1867, the *shogunate* (*Encyclopædia Britannica*), to mark the bodies of criminals. For example, there were two lines on the arm for the second theft offence. Criminals changed these tattoos into creative and colourful signs, designed to reclaim their body from this form of branding. But this was also a sign of strength, because it was extremely painful, and it took a long time to get a tattoo in those days (Siniawer, 2008: 21-22). Over the centuries, tattooing in Japan has been used as a form of punishment for crimes, such as murder, betrayal and treason. It was also used to brand slaves and to distinguish groups of people who had been cast out from normal society. Tattooing as a punishment was outlawed in 1870, and after that it became more and more popular in the pleasure quarters. Those with tattoos would usually not be in high-ranking positions in society. Many have pointed out a connection between full body tattoos in Japan and the *Suikoden*, a Japanese translation of fourteenth century Chinese stories about a Robin Hood-like figure who acquired full body tattoos. Most of the public in Japan disapproved of tattoos, piercing the skin was considered a sin and tattooing in Japan was prohibited until 1945. However, some people decided to go against the rules and hide their tattoos under clothing, perhaps thinking that like the heroes in the *Suikoden*, they were the forces of good against an overly authoritative world. When tattooing was outlawed, tattoo artists lost their customers in mainstream society and had to start accepting more customers from the underground. This led to tattoos being viewed as something that only criminals adorned their bodies with. After the end of the World War II, tattoos became associated with the yakuza, rather than with criminals in general. Because of his affiliation with the yakuza, a former cabinet minister was referred to as *Irezumi Daijin*, or the tattooed minister, by his constituents. In recent years, tattoos have become increasingly popular amongst young people in Japan, although they tend to

have more western-type tattoos, which are usually smaller and less intricate, whereas full body, Japanese-style tattoos are still heavily associated with the yakuza. Tattoos carry a tremendous amount of meaning to the yakuza, they represent part of the initiation process before entering the yakuza, the irreversibility of entering this group, a proof of perseverance and manliness when a person is able to go through the lengthy and painful process, and they provide a trademark on the recipient's body (Adelstein, 2010: 68; Hendry, 2005: 22-26, 31).

### **Conclusion**

During the course of writing this essay, I found out many interesting facts about the Japanese mafia. An exact point and time of origin for the Yakuza has not been documented anywhere, however from reading the books on and the research that has been done about the yakuza, for example on the way they behave, how they treat one another and what kind of people this organization is made up of, I came to the conclusion that the organization is most likely made up of people who have, for one reason or another, become outcasts from society. They share many traits with many groups of outcasts throughout Japanese history. They control the gambling, legal and illegal, in Japan, as the *bakuto* did in the 1800's. The *bakuto* formed groups and became known as yakuza. The yakuza as they are known today got their tradition of self amputating fingers to demonstrate loyalty and their name yakuza from the *bakuto*.

The groups that were known as *Tekiya*, were known for swindling people out of their money by selling them faulty goods. The *tekiya*, like many other groups at the time, were travellers, and Japanese society at the time regarded all travellers as suspicious characters. As outsiders themselves, they expanded their group by letting others who had no place in society into their organization. The *bakuto* and *tekiya* left each other alone, as each of these groups stuck to their own territory and their separate businesses. These two groups are considered the two main groups that eventually became the yakuza, and at some point, these groups must have merged into one larger group, because there are elements in each of them that can be found in the yakuza today.

The *burakumin* were a class of people who became outcasts in society as soon as they were born: they were thought to have originated from people who worked with dead bodies and were thus considered unclean, and as such, other people wanted nothing to do with them: marriage with their kind was forbidden; and they were heavily discriminated against by the public. But there was one place where they were welcome:

in the camps of the *tekiya* gangs, where everyone already belonged to a group that was discriminated against.

There were also two other groups which I researched that have a connection to the *yakuza*, called the *kabuki mono* and the *machi yakko*. The *kabuki mono* were *ronin*, samurai who had lost their master in battle. These out-of-work samurai would wander around Japan until they found a new master to serve, during this transition from one master to another, they would often become bandits. Then the *Tokugawa shogunate* brought peace to Japan, and the samurai became a dying class, and most of them lost their jobs. Many were not able to adapt to society and formed gangs. The similarities between them and the *yakuza* is found mainly in the fact that they formed gangs which displayed an unusual amount of loyalty to one another, and both groups were formed from groups of people who were not welcome in society. However, the *yakuza* tend to deny this ancestry, as they prefer to see the history of another group as that of their ancestors, a group with a more noble cause -- the *machi yakko*, or the ones who defended the villages against the *kabuki mono*. They were seen as heroes by the villagers, which is how the *yakuza* want to be seen by the public. It is however difficult to find a connection between the *machi yakko* and the *yakuza*. I did find one story that links them to the *bakuto*, the story of a *machi yakko* labour broker who recruited men to build roads and who ran a gambling house at the same time, tempting the workers to gamble and lose a portion of their salaries back to him. This is almost identical to the origin of the *bakuto*, who began as a scheme by the government to swindle construction workers out of their salaries through gambling. Although the *machi yakko* were seen as honourable groups, they were also directly involved in criminal activities and were considered to be disorderly rogues. The *yakuza* see themselves as honourable outlaws and claim that the *machi yakko* are their ancestors, however that is highly unlikely, as both the *kabuki mono* and the *machi yakko* had disappeared by the late 17th century due to crackdowns by the *shogunate*. The *bakuto* and *tekiya* appeared during the mid 18th century, and the fact that these groups emerged slightly later than the end of the *kabuki mono* and the *machi yakko* led me to believe that the latter groups either merged with or became the *bakuto* and *tekiya*. The reasons I believe that the *bakuto* and *tekiya* are the forefathers of the modern day *yakuza* are, on one hand, the many similarities between the groups, such as the protection rackets set up by the *tekiya* and the fact that they operated on the fringes of legal and illegal work. Then there are the *bakuto*, which are not only the group in which the name *yakuza* originated, but also the group from which they got their custom of gambling and the tradition of amputating fingers as a form of

apology. The *bakuto* later moved on to politics, and as they grew in numbers, they began to resort to violence in order to protect their territory. This led to them being labelled a violent group, changing the group into something more similar to the modern day *yakuza*. Both of these groups also share the same internal structure, which is comparable to that of a family.

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