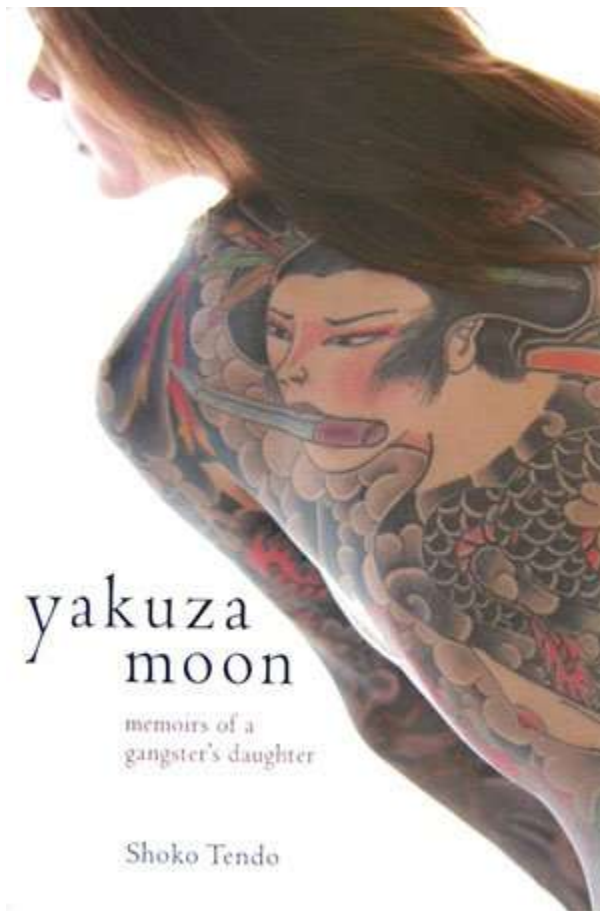


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## Japanese Gang Violence and the Healing Power of Tattoos<sup>i</sup>

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### **A young girl's life in shambles**

*"One day a young gangster came to our door and tried to hand his severed little finger to my father – a traditional method of Yakuza atonement. My mother tried to shield my eyes, but I could still see the blood dripping from his hand. My dad was furious and split the guy's head open with an object in the hall. He said, 'Why did you cut your finger off? You need it for work.'"*

These jarring lines are a narrative by Japanese author Shoko Tendo, whose book *Yakuza Moon – Memoirs of a Gangster's*

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*Daughter* explores the seedy world of Japan's infamous crime syndicate: The Yakuza.

In the book, she speaks of life as the daughter of a Yakuza boss. The violence and abuse she faced as a child scarred her deeply – both physically and emotionally; yet, by getting herself tattooed Yakuza-style, she found a way to move past the hurt, and start life afresh.

So, how could a tattoo bring about such healing?

To answer this we need to first understand the Yakuza and what it means to grow up in their world.

### **Yakuza and the world of organized crime**

As you probably know from the scores of movies on the subject, the Yakuza represent organized crime in Japan.

One source traces their origin back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when local men began earning the distinction of being town bullies. Having skill with the sword (they were often masterless Samuri, i.e. Ronin), they would harass and terrorize the local population without any fear of reciprocation.

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In any case, the modern-day Yakuza came to prominence after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, when they established networks within Japanese black markets and infiltrated positions of power (they commonly associated with politicians and celebrities).

Yakuza often come from very poor families, but once part of the organization they have access to almost limitless wealth. Dressed in the finest Armani and chauffeured in the most luxurious Benz', a Yakuza boss truly lives life in style. And with dozens of henchmen under his control and a network of other Yakuza families to draw strength from, he is close to unstoppable. Imagine the power...

## **Yakuza tattoos and identity**

So what exactly does it mean to get a Yakuza-style tattoo?

Well, the Yakuza cover their entire body (apart from the face and hands) with tattoos, usually drawing heavily from classic Japanese iconography like the dragon and the tiger. They wear their ink as a status symbol and as a means of distinguishing themselves and their (violent) lifestyle from the rest of society.

The public see the Yakuza as bullies; they see themselves as saviours; and the tattoos symbolize it all.

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In fact, full body tattooing is so much a part of Yakuza identity that in an effort to keep these gangsters out, many Japanese bath houses and spas simply ban people with full body tattoos from entering.

## **Accepting the past so as to embrace the future**

Coming back to Shoko Tendo's experience...

While Shoko confesses that she doesn't quite understand *why* tattooing liberated her, perhaps we can come up with a reason.

For most of her life Shoko struggled with the fact that she was the daughter of a gangster. As much as she loved her father, she obviously suffered because of him. And as long as she refused to accept that part of her past ... as long as she denied its existence ... her mind remained locked in a battle of conflicting emotions.

But in getting herself tattooed she was embracing her Yakuza past and acknowledging that it would always be a part of her.

With this acknowledgement came acceptance. And with acceptance came the freedom to move on.

Who would have thought that a little ink was capable of so much?

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jun/27/books.japan>

(shoko tendo)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/interview-shoko-tendo-on-growing-up-in-the-seamy-world-of-japanese-gangsters-399537.html>

(shoko tendo and intro to yakuza)

<http://searchwarp.com/swa269920.htm> (more about the impact of tendo's tattoos)

<http://www.dreadloki.com/pivot/pivot/entry.php?uid=standard-718> (yakuza and tattoos)