

THE HONORABLE OUTLAWS

ONE MIGHT CALL GORO FUJITA THE BARD OF THE YAKUZA AND HE WOULD NOT object. His business card, ornate even by Japanese standards, introduces the man by asking for forgiveness, explaining in humble terms that he drinks too much but is devoted to his work. He is a short, round fellow whose bushy hair hangs around a face that might belong to either a comedian or a thug, depending on his mood. He is, in fact, a former gangster, a veteran of the Tosei-kai, the largely ethnic Korean gang known for its ruthless control of nightclubs in Tokyo's famous Ginza district. But Goro Fujita no longer patrols the night streets for the "Ginza Police," as they once were called. He is now something of a celebrity among the yakuza, as novelist, historian, and storyteller of Japan's underworld.

Fujita is the proud author of some thirty novels about the yakuza, romantic works that dwell on a particularly Japanese brand of virility, bravery, and fatalism, of noble values that can be traced back to the samurai warriors of feudal Japan. They are books with names like *Big Gambler*, *Cemetery of Chivalry*, *Poetry of the Outlaw*, and *I Don't Need My Grave*. He is master of the sword fight scene, interpreter of arcane custom, and archivist of criminal history. He beams while presenting, alongside his many novels, three encyclopedic tomes that comprise the core of his lifework: the first, a massive genealogical dictionary of the complex kinships among the yakuza; the others, two volumes of a treatise on right-wing politics and organized crime in Japan. It is a history, says the author, that dates back over three hundred years.

At his comfortable home on the outskirts of Tokyo, Fujita carries on a rare seminar for special guests on the history of the yakuza. He lovingly pulls out old photos of early bosses, pressed between the pages of a dozen hardbound volumes stored on his fine wooden shelves. His office library

bulges with a unique Japanese literary collection—books on swords, guns, martial arts, general history, regional history, war, and the right wing.

Fujita is a man who spins a good yarn, tells long-winded jokes, and can hold even the demanding attention of a yakuza boss. He writes fiction because he doesn't like to use real names. "Too many demands would be placed upon me," he explains. Fujita's characters, nonetheless, manage to convey his profound feelings for the yakuza world, sentiments that have found a welcome audience among the Japanese reading public. His work belongs to a genre of Japanese literature that has long extolled the image of the romantic gangster. The yakuza, in fact, form a central theme of popular culture in Japan, with heroes and anti-heroes enshrined in countless movies, books, ballads, and short stories.

For Fujita and his colleagues, the history of organized crime in Japan is an honorable one, filled with tales of yakuza Robin Hoods coming to the aid of the common people. The heroes of these stories are society's victims who made good, losers who finally won, men who lived the life of the outlaw with dignity. These tales stand at the heart of the yakuza's self-image—and of public perception as well. Yakuza experts challenge the accuracy of these portrayals, as do most scholars of Japanese history, but the feeling persists among Japanese—including many police—that organized crime in their country bears a noble past. To understand this romantic image of the gangster, one must go back nearly four centuries to the country's Middle Ages, the source of countless modern legends that in Japan take the place of the frontier West in American culture—where the sword replaces the six-shooter and the cowboy is a samurai.

Samurai Bandits and Chivalrous Commoners

To the commoners of feudal Japan they were known as *kabuki-mono*, the crazy ones, and as early as 1612 they began attracting the attention of local officials. Like rebels of a more recent era, they wore outlandish costumes and strange haircuts; their behavior was often equally bizarre. At their sides hung remarkably long swords that nearly trailed along the ground as the outlaws swaggered through the streets of old Japan. Terrorizing the defenseless townspeople almost at will, these outlaws were not above using them to practice *tsuji-giri*, a hideous rite in which a samurai would waylay a passerby to test a new blade.

The *kabuki-mono* comprised the legendary crime gangs of medieval Japan, eccentric samurai warriors known also as the *hatamoto-yakko*, or, loosely, the servants of the shogun. They made heavy use of slang and adopted outrageous names, such as Taisho Jingi-gumi, or the All-Gods Gang. They displayed an unusual loyalty among themselves, swearing to protect one another under any circumstance, even against their own parents.

It was the Tokugawa era, the time of the shogunate. Centuries of civil war had come to a historic end when Ieyasu Tokugawa unified the island country in 1604, thereby becoming the first great shogun. But Japan was not yet stable. Peace in the nation meant that as many as 500,000 samurai were suddenly unemployed, workers whose best skills lay largely in soldiering and the martial arts. Eventually, most samurai joined the growing merchant class, as large villages like Osaka and castle towns like Tokyo and Nagoya were transformed into bustling urban centers. Others found jobs in the expanding civil bureaucracy, or as scholars and philosophers. But not all were success stories. The kabuki-mono—nearly all of them samurai of good standing—found themselves caught within a rigid medieval society about to enter a two-hundred-year period of self-imposed isolation, with few opportunities beyond those offered by street fighting, robbery, and terror.

Such a life was not a new one for the *ronin*, or masterless samurai. In earlier times, many had turned to banditry when their lords were defeated in battle, looting the towns and countryside as they meandered across Japan. Traditionally, these renegade warriors were taken into the armies of the feudal lords then warring over Japan, but now, in the relative peace of Tokugawa society, these new groups of outlaw samurai began to take on a life of their own. (The gangs of roving bandits from this era would later be brought to life in the Japanese movie *Seven Samurai*, which in turn inspired the American Western *The Magnificent Seven*.)

While these criminal servants of the shogun—the hatamoto-yakko—might appear to be the true forebears of the Japanese underworld, today's yakuza identify not with them but with their historic enemies, the *machi-yakko*, or servants of the town. These were bands of young townsmen who, as fear and resentment grew, formed to fend off the increasing attacks by hatamoto-yakko. At times they sported the same odd habits as their opponents, but their leaders were often of different stock—clerks, shopkeepers, innkeepers, artisans. Others were laborers rounded up by local construction bosses, including a good many homeless wanderers and stray samurai. Like the gangs of today, the *machi-yakko* were adept at gambling and developed a close relationship with their leaders that may well have been a precedent for the tightly organized yakuza.

The townspeople naturally cheered on the *machi-yakko*, elated to watch fellow commoners stand up to the murderous samurai. Indeed, among the citizens of Edo, as Tokyo was then called, the town servants quickly became folk heroes. It is understandable, then, that the yakuza—who see themselves as honorable outlaws—have chosen to look upon the *machi-yakko* as their spiritual ancestors. But a direct connection is difficult to make. Kanehiro Hoshino, a criminologist with Japan's Police Science Research Institute, points out that both yakko groups disappeared by the late seventeenth century after repeated crackdowns by an alarmed shogunate. Tokyo's All-

Gods Gang, for example, met its fate in 1686 when officials rounded up three hundred of its members and executed the ringleaders. Although occasionally the gangs no doubt performed honorable acts, they seem largely to have been what one scholar called “disorderly rogues.”

Like most Robin Hoods throughout history, the *machi-yakko* owe their reputation not to deed but to legend, in this case the numerous eighteenth-century plays in which they are invariably portrayed as heroes and champions of the weak. So popular were these dramas that the Japanese theater itself owes much of its early development to the depiction of these marauding bands of eccentrics. They were further heralded in assorted folktales and songs that remain among the most popular of Japan’s past. In these stories and plays they are billed as the *otokodate*, or chivalrous commoners. There is the tale, for example, of Ude no Kisaburo, or One-armed Kisaburo, immortalized in a kabuki play. Kisaburo, a skilled swordsman who protects the townspeople, is excommunicated by his fencing teacher after having an affair with a woman. Seeking his teacher’s forgiveness, he severs his right arm in an act of remorse and then goes on to battle the thugs of Tokyo.

The most celebrated tale of the *machi-yakko* is that of Chobei Banzuinin. Born into a ronin family in southern Japan, Chobei journeyed to Tokyo around 1640, where he joined his brother, who was the chief priest of a Buddhist temple. Chobei became a labor broker, recruiting workers to build the roads surrounding Tokyo and to repair the stone walls around the shogun’s palace. Using a ploy that would become a *yakuza* mainstay, Chobei opened a gambling den. The betting not only served to attract workers, but also enabled him to retrieve a portion of the salaries he paid them.

According to the stories and kabuki plays about his life, Chobei became the leader of Tokyo’s *machi-yakko*. The tales are filled with his great deeds—a town girl rescued from assault, the marriage of two lovers once unable to wed because of their different social classes. Whenever thanked by those he helped, he would answer: “We have made it our principle to live with a chivalrous spirit. When put to the sword, we’ll lose our lives. That’s our fate. I just ask you to pray for the repose of my soul when my turn comes.” As his words predicted, he was put to the sword, slain by his arch-enemy Jurozaemon Mizuno, the leader of Tokyo’s *hatamoto-yakko*. Although the circumstances leading to Chobei’s death are uncertain, one kabuki play offers the following finish:

One day, Mizuno invites Chobei through his messenger to come to his residence and have a drink together in a token of reconciliation. Chobei and his many followers immediately determine that the invitation is a trap. Not listening to his followers, who ask him not to go, Chobei goes to Mizuno’s house alone.

Mizuno receives Chobei respectfully at his home, and before long, a ban-

quet begins. At the banquet, one of Mizuno's followers spills sake from a large cup on Chobei's kimono under pretense of a slip of his hand. As planned, another of Mizuno's followers takes Chobei to a bathroom, suggesting he have a quick bath and change his kimono. When Chobei becomes defenseless in the bathroom, four or five samurai, all Mizuno's followers, attack him. But being proud of his physical strength, he defeats them without any difficulty. Holding a spear in his hand, Mizuno himself then appears in the bathroom. Looking into the eyes of Mizuno, Chobei says calmly, "Certainly, I offer my life to you. I'm ready to throw away my life, otherwise I'd never have accepted your invitation and come here alone; I'd have listened to my followers who worried about my life. Whether one lives to be a hundred or dies as a baby depends on his fate. You are a person of sufficient status to take my life because you are a noted hatamoto. . . . I offer my life to you with good grace. I knew I would be killed if I came here; but, if it was rumored that Chobei, who had built up a reputation as a machi-yakko, held his life so dearly, it would be an everlasting disgrace upon my name. You shall have my life for nothing. I have iron nerves, so lance me to the heart without the slightest reluctance!"

Though tough, Mizuno shrinks from these words and hesitates to spear him. His followers urge him. Finally, he makes up his mind and stabs Chobei through the heart with his long spike. The curtain falls with Mizuno's line: "He was too great to be killed."

Another play climaxes with the gallant Chobei being sliced to death "like a carp on a chopping block." Whatever the hero's final fate, his story has made quite an impression on today's yakuza, who claim him as one of their own.

The Yakuza Emerge

The legends and traditions of the machi-yakko were inherited by a later generation of "chivalrous commoners." Among them were Japan's old firemen—gutsy, quick-tempered fellows who usually did construction work but also served as the community's volunteer fire department. Other common heroes included police detectives, leaders of labor gangs, sumo wrestlers, and the members of Japan's eighteenth-century crime syndicates.

These early yakuza would not appear until a hundred years after the death of Chobei Banzuiin, in a society still bound by the feudal laws of the shogun. They were the enterprising members of a medieval underworld who today are widely seen as the true ancestors of the modern yakuza: the *bakuto*, or traditional gamblers, and the *tekiya*, or street peddlers. So distinctive were the habits of the two groups that Japanese police today still often classify yakuza members as either bakuto or tekiya (although the gangs are now diversified into countless rackets). The ranks of both groups were largely filled from the same quarters—the poor, the landless, and the delin-

quents and misfits found in any large society. Each group, however, stuck closely to its unique area of control to such an extent that different groups could operate within the same small territory without conflict: the bakuto along the busy highways and towns of old Japan, the tekiya amid the nation's growing markets and fairs.

It is to these rustic bands of itinerant traders and roadside gamblers that Goro Fujita traces back yakuza genealogy in his *One Hundred Year History*. Through his oral histories with yakuza elders, research at Japan's modern libraries, and even field trips to the tombstones of ancient yakuza, Fujita claims to be able to link today's godfathers to a criminal lineage extending back to the mid-1700s. The accuracy of the genealogical charts within Fujita's books, however, is less certain than the degree to which they illustrate the preoccupation with history among the varied yakuza clans. Alongside the pictures of great godfathers that adorn the walls of gang headquarters today are family trees that link the group, however precariously, to these noble outlaws of old. What is unusual is that such ancestral connections are invariably made not by blood, but through adoption.

Like the Italian Mafia, the yakuza began organizing in families, with a godfather at the top and new members adopted into the clan as older brothers, younger brothers, and children. The yakuza, however, added to that structure the unique Japanese relationship known as *oyabun-kobun*, or, literally, "father role-child role." The *oyabun* provides advice, protection, and help, and in return receives the unswerving loyalty and service of his *kobun* whenever needed.

In the feudal society of eighteenth-century Japan, the *oyabun-kobun* system often provided the basis for relations between teacher and apprentice, between lord and vassal, and, in the nascent underworld, between boss and follower. It was a mirror of the traditional Japanese family in which the father held great and final authority, including the power to choose marriage partners and occupations for his children. Within the early yakuza gangs the *oyabun-kobun* relationship created remarkable strength and cohesion, leading at times to a fanatic devotion to the boss. Today, despite encroaching modernization, it continues to foster a level of loyalty, obedience, and trust among the yakuza unknown within American crime groups except between the closest of blood relatives. Sociologist Hiroaki Iwai, an authority on delinquent groups in Japan, wrote of the devotion to the *oyabun*: "New *kobun* will be expected to act as *teppodama* ('bullets') in fights with other gangs, standing in the front line, facing the guns and swords of the other side, risking his life. . . . On occasion he will take the blame and go to prison for a crime committed by his *oyabun*."

Like other organized crime groups, the early yakuza developed an elaborate ceremony to initiate new recruits into the organization. Within the

triad societies of the Chinese underworld, the rites involved the killing of a young rooster, the reciting of thirty-six oaths before an altar, and the drawing of blood from a recruit's fingers. The cutting of a new member's skin, done to symbolize blood relations, was also heavily practiced by the Sicilian Mafia until the 1930s. The old Mafia initiations had religious overtones as well. As paper was burned, representing the immolation of a saint, the recruit swore an oath pledging his honor, loyalty, and blood to the Mafia.

Within the *yakuza*, *bakuto* and *tekiya* began using a formal exchange of sake cups to symbolize the blood connection. These rites, however, have represented not only entry into the gang, but also entry into the *oyabun-kobun* relationship. The ceremony holds religious significance as well, typically being performed before a shrine devoted to Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan. The amount of sake in the cups depends upon one's status. If the participants are not father and child, but brother and brother—as in treaties between gang bosses—equal amounts are poured into each cup. If the relationship is one of elder brother and younger brother, the elder brother's cup is filled six-tenths and the younger brother's cup four-tenths. Various other combinations exist, each coming with its own carefully prescribed set of duties within the "family."

Such ceremonies continue today, although usually in abbreviated form, and commemorate not only initiations but promotions, peace treaties, and mergers as well. One ceremony between *oyabun* and *kobun*, held in its full formality, was described by sociologist Iwai:

An auspicious day is chosen, and all members of the organization will attend, with *torimochinin* or *azukarinin* ("guarantors") present as intermediaries. Rice, whole fish, and piles of salt are placed in the Shinto shrine alcove, in front of which the *oyabun* and *kobun* sit facing each other. The *torimochinin* arrange the fish ceremonially and fill the drinking-cups with sake, adding fish scales and salt. . . . They then turn solemnly to the *kobun* and warn him of his future duties: "Having drunk from the *oyabun*'s cup and he from yours, you now owe loyalty to the *ikka* [family] and devotion to your *oyabun*. Even should your wife and children starve, even at the cost of your life, your duty is now to the *ikka* and *oyabun*," or "From now on you have no other occupation until the day you die. The *oyabun* is your only parent; follow him through fire and flood."

The *oyabun-kobun* system reached its peak around the turn of the twentieth century, influencing the structure of political parties, social movements, the military, business and industry, and the underworld. Today it remains a concept with which most Japanese are intimately familiar, and while it continues to carry certain responsibilities, the relationship is generally treated far less seriously than in the past. An *oyabun*, for example, is now often a senior at work with whom one is especially close—the equivalent, per-

haps, of a mentor in the West. It is almost exclusively within the yakuza that the oyabun-kobun system remains unchanged from its past, existing in a world where kobun will kill others or even kill themselves for the sake of the oyabun. An old adage still popular among gang members goes: "If the boss says that a passing crow is white, you must agree." It is this relationship that stands at the heart of the present, and future, of the Japanese underworld.

Tekiya: The Peddlers

There are various theories offered about the origin of the tekiya. Goro Fujita believes they began as nomads, peddling their goods at castle towns and trading centers. Other ideas center around the word *yashi*, an earlier name used for the peddlers. Because *yashi* connotes banditry, tekiya may have begun as ronin outlaws roaming the countryside. The most widely accepted theory, though, is tied to the yashi's patron god Shinno, a Chinese god of agriculture believed to have discovered medicine to help the sick and poor. This account holds that the yashi were groups of medicine peddlers, something akin to the traveling snake-oil salesmen of America's Wild West (the word *shi* can mean medicine and *ya* a merchant or peddler). Over time the name became a catchall for peddlers of various kinds.

Whatever their origins, by the mid-1700s the tekiya had banded together for mutual interest and protection from the perils of Tokugawa Japan. The gangs were able to establish control over the portable booths in market fairs held at temples and shrines. They were men with a well-deserved reputation for shoddy goods and deceptive salesmanship, a tradition that survives today among the nation's thousands of tekiya members. The early peddlers developed a proven repertoire of cheating techniques: they would lie about the quality and origin of a product; act drunk and make a show of selling items cheaply so customers would believe they didn't know what they were doing; or delude the customer with such enterprising tricks as selling miniature trees (*bonsai*) without roots.

The tekiya were organized according to feudal status, with members falling into one of generally five ranks: the boss or oyabun, the underboss, officers, enlisted men, and apprentices. The gang became a sophisticated operation in certain respects. The oyabun's home served as both gang headquarters and training center for new members, who began by living in the boss's home and learning the business. They would later join the enlisted men, who were required to peddle the boss's goods through the countryside. Only after they returned with good results were they admitted as full-status members. All members, however, were bound by a strict organization, a domineering oyabun, and, among most groups, the following "Three Commandments of Tekiya":

Do not touch the wife of another member (a rule established because wives were left alone for long periods while their husbands went peddling).

Do not reveal the secrets of the organization to the police.

Keep strict loyalty to the oyabun-kobun relationship.

The boss controlled not only his kobun, but the allocation of stalls and even the availability of certain goods. He would collect rents and protection money, and pocket the difference between them and the rental payment required by the shrine or temple. It was a kind of extortion that would continue to the present day: tekiya bosses demanding payment from street peddlers for the privilege of opening their stalls. Those who refused would find their goods stolen, their customers driven away, and risk being physically assaulted by gang members anxious to maintain their monopoly over the region. Disagreements between tekiya bosses over territory led to frequent fights. Nevertheless, a good deal of cooperation existed among the gangs, for as the peddlers trekked from fair to fair they inevitably fell under the care of other bosses, who, upon payment, would see to it that the vendors were assigned a favorable place to open their stalls.

Unlike the gamblers, the tekiya by and large did legal work. Indeed, feudal authorities greatly increased the power of tekiya bosses by granting official recognition of their status between the years 1735 and 1740. In order to reduce the widespread fraud among tekiya vendors and to prevent future turf wars, the government appointed a number of oyabun as “supervisors” and allowed them the dignity of “a surname and two swords,” symbols of near-samurai status. With such legitimacy, and with the rapid growth of towns over the next century, the gangs began to expand. Some started organizing additional fairs of their own, becoming, in a sense, the “carnival people” of Japan. They put on festivals resembling circuses with colorful sideshows, and numerous tekiya stands selling food, gifts, housewares, and whatever might attract a buyer. Despite their newfound legitimacy, however, the gangs continued to nurture some thoroughly criminal traits. They would take into their vast network wanted criminals and other fugitives; their protection rackets expanded along with their territory; and their frequent brawls with other gangs often turned tekiya meeting places into armed camps.

Although the early tekiya were made up largely of the same types of misfits as their gambling cousins, the bakuto, they also attracted members of Japan’s ancestral class of outcasts. These were the *burakumin*, or “people of the hamlet,” who comprised a separate caste somewhat similar to the untouchables of India. The burakumin were an arbitrary class, consisting largely of those who worked with dead animals, such as leather workers, or

in “unclean” occupations such as undertaking. Discrimination directed against the burakumin was cruel and relentless. They were popularly referred to as *eta* (heavily polluted) or *hinin* (nonhuman). Just as the samurai were able to abuse the commoners, so were the commoners allowed to torment the burakumin.

In his book *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts*, historian Mikiso Hane describes the conditions under which the burakumin lived:

They were restricted in where they could live, quality of housing, mobility in and out of their hamlets, clothing, hairdo and even footwear. . . . In some areas they were required to wear special identification marks, such as a yellow collar. They were banned from the shrines and temples of non-eta communities, and intermarriage with other classes was strictly forbidden.

In relation to the underworld, the system seemed to feed on itself. Under the Tokugawa regime, those who violated laws or customs could be relegated to the status of eta or hinin; some tekiya members, therefore, already were branded as nonhuman. At the same time, many born into burakumin families joined the tekiya gangs, which provided a path out of abject poverty and disgrace. Peddling offered the burakumin one of the few opportunities to leave their birthplace, where they would forever be known as outcasts. It was a significant pool of potential outlaws; by the end of the Tokugawa era in 1867, the burakumin numbered about 400,000 of Japan's 33 million people.

Legal discrimination against the burakumin was officially ended in 1871 by a government decree. However, the abuse and victimization of these people remains to this day, and continues to drive substantial numbers of burakumin into the hands of the yakuza.

Bakuto: The Gamblers

Much as Japan's outcasts helped swell the ranks of the tekiya, the bakuto also had little trouble finding members. The first gambling gangs were in fact recruited by government officials and local bosses who, under the Tokugawa administration, were responsible for a variety of irrigation and construction projects. These efforts required the payment of substantial sums to the workers, money that their employers schemed to get back in much the same way as Chobei Banzuiin a century earlier: by hiring a motley crew of outlaws, laborers, and farmers to gamble with the workers.

The hired gamblers gradually began attracting misfit merchants and artisans, as well as Japanese of higher status, such as samurai and sumo wrestlers. As they organized into disciplined bands, these early gamblers found their niche along the nation's great trunk roads, where their colorful lives formed the basis for countless tales of old Japan. Their contribution,

though, would be far greater than enriching Japanese folklore: the bakuto became what Tokyo criminologist Hoshino calls “the kernel of organized crime groups” in Japan. They would give that country’s underworld not only its central tradition of gambling but also its customs of finger-cutting and the first use of the word *yakuza*.

The highways of feudal Japan proved a benign environment for the gamblers. As a deterrent to misbehavior in the provinces, the Tokugawa government decreed that all lords visit Tokyo once a year and that their families reside in the city permanently. The main highways thus became the political lifelines of the country, carrying frequent processions of nobles and servants, as well as an almost constant stream of couriers. Spaced at convenient intervals along the road were stopping places where the traveler might find a night’s rest and some entertainment, including the chance to wager a coin or two. Japan’s most famous route, the Tokaido Highway, was built in 1603, joining Kyoto—the ancient capital and home of the emperor—with Tokyo, seat of the shogun and real power of the Tokugawa government. In all, there were fifty-three of these way stations along the highway; most of these, by the mid-nineteenth century, played host to a local bakuto gang.

It was along the Tokaido and other highways that the gamblers first began using the word *yakuza*. According to the most widely held belief, the term derives from the worst possible score in the card game *hanafuda* (flower cards). Three cards are dealt per player in the game, and the last digit of their total counts as the number of the hand; therefore, with a hand of 20—the worst score—one’s total is zero. Among the losing combinations: a sequence of 8-9-3, or in Japanese, *ya-ku-sa*.

The losing combination of ya-ku-sa came to be used widely among the early gambling gangs to denote something useless. It was later applied to the gamblers themselves, to mean they were useless to society, born to lose. For years the word was limited to the bakuto gangs—there are still purists today among the Japanese underworld who insist that the only true *yakuza* are the traditional gamblers. As the twentieth century progressed, however, the word gradually received wide use by the general public as a name for bakuto, tekiya, and a host of other organized crime groups in Japan.

Like the tekiya, the early bakuto groups developed a set of rules that included strict adherence to secrecy, obedience to the oyabun-kobun system, and a ranking order determining one’s status and role within the group. It was a feudal organization with almost total control resting with the oyabun. Promotions were likely to be based on members’ performances during gang fights; gambling skills and loyalty to the oyabun also figured greatly. For the lowly kobun, promotion through the ranks could be an arduous task. He would generally be assigned such jobs as polishing dice, cleaning the house of the oyabun, running errands, and baby-sitting.

The gamblers dealt severely with those who broke the gangs' rules. Cowardice, disobedience, and revealing gang secrets were treated not only as acts of betrayal but also as affronts to the reputation and honor of the gang. Certain offenses were particularly taboo, including rape and petty theft. Short of death, the heaviest punishment was expulsion. After banishing the transgressor, the oyabun notified other bakuto gangs that the gambler was no longer welcome in his group; by general agreement, the outcast could not then join a rival band. It is a tradition that survives today. In the event of expulsion, the gang sends a volley of open-faced postcards via regular mail to the various underworld families. The cards comprise a formal notice of expulsion and ask that the gangs reject any association with the former member.

For serious violations not meriting death or expulsion, the bakuto introduced the custom of *yubitsume*, in which the top joint of the little finger is ceremoniously severed. The practice of finger-cutting was not confined to the bakuto. Others in the lower rungs of Tokugawa society later employed it, including the prostitutes of Tokyo's famous Yoshiwara district, who saw it as a mark of devotion to their special lovers. The yakuza, however, used the ritual amputations more practically. Finger-cutting reportedly began as a means of weakening the hand, which meant that the gambler's all-important sword could not be as firmly grasped. Such an act, whether forced or voluntary, succeeded in making the errant kobun more dependent on the protection of his boss.

When amputated in apology, the severed phalanx is wrapped in fine cloth and solemnly handed to the oyabun. The oyabun generally accepts, for great merit has traditionally been accorded this act. Further infractions, however, could mean another amputation at the second joint of the same digit, or at the top joint of another finger. Often *yubitsume* occurs just prior to expulsion, as a lasting punishment inflicted by the gang.

The practice of finger-cutting spread to the tekiya and other crime groups, and, according to Japanese authorities, has actually increased since feudal times. A 1993 survey by government researchers found that 45 percent of modern yakuza members had severed finger joints, and that 15 percent had performed the act at least twice.

The other great trademark of the yakuza, the tattoo, also won widespread acceptance among the bakuto during Japan's feudal period. The yakuza's tattoo originally was a mark of punishment, used by authorities to ostracize the outlaws from society; criminals generally would be tattooed with one black ring around an arm for each offense. There is, however, a nobler tradition of tattooing in Japan. Its remarkable designs, considered by many to be the world's finest, date back hundreds of years. As early as the third century, a Chinese account of the Japanese noted: "Men both great and small

tattoo their faces and work designs upon their bodies.” Over the years the patterns grew more complex, blending a striking array of famous gods, folk heroes, animals, and flowers into one fluid portrait. By the late seventeenth century, intricate, full-body designs became popular with the gamblers and with laborers who worked with much of their bodies exposed: porters, stable hands, carpenters, masons. Occasionally, the *geisha* (Japan’s professional female entertainers) would indulge, as did the prostitutes of Tokyo and Osaka, who would tattoo the name of a favored client on their arm or inner thigh. The Tokugawa government, which tried periodically to prohibit tattooing, was unable to curb its popularity.

The traditional tattooing process is an agonizing one. Using a tool carved from bone or wood, and tipped with a cluster of tiny needles, the artist punches into the skin with a succession of painful jabs. The thrusting action of the tattooer is particularly stinging to such sensitive parts as the chest and buttocks. The operation, furthermore, is a prolonged one. A complete back tattoo, stretching from the collar of the neck down to the tailbone, can take one hundred hours.

Such extensive tattooing, then, became a test of strength, and the gamblers eagerly adopted the practice to show the world their courage, toughness, and masculinity. It served, at the same time, another, more humble purpose—as a self-inflicted wound that would permanently distinguish the outcasts from the rest of the world. The tattoo marks the *yakuza* as misfits, forever unable or unwilling to adapt themselves to Japanese society.

As with ritual finger-cutting, the tattooing spread from the *bakuto* to the *tekiya* and other Japanese gangs, and the practice became increasingly confined to the underworld. So closely associated with the *yakuza* is the custom today that saunas and public baths, wanting to protect their clientele from gangsters, hang signs reading “No tattoos allowed.” Today an estimated 68 percent of the *yakuza* bear some tattooing, although many employ modern electric needles, which are faster and less painful. Still, it is a mark of great respect within the underworld to have endured the torture of the traditional method.

The *bakuto*’s contributions to criminal history extend to traditions other than tattoos and finger-cutting. Certain early gangster bands were granted a measure of official sanction and became adept at working with authorities, though less formally than the *tekiya*. Some *oyabun* were even deputized. Such agreements with the police often allowed the gangs to consolidate and expand their power. Other gangs, however, viewed cooperation with the police as contrary to the gambler’s code of conduct and often attacked the errant *bakuto*. Nevertheless, these early moves by authorities to recognize,

work with, and even co-opt the underworld broke important ground. Similar agreements later formed the basis for political corruption that would reach the highest levels of Japanese government.

Despite official cooperation by some groups, and occasional bloody disputes over territory by others, the early bakuto generally helped one another. Indeed, at times they resembled an underworld mutual aid society. Of particular note was the bakuto's system of "travelers," a custom by which itinerant gamblers would visit the boss of each region on their route, stay for several days, and receive a small amount of money for expenses. The traveler was treated with the great courtesy reserved for an invited guest: according to bakuto etiquette, although host and visitor were strangers, they were in the same profession.

The travelers were among the most colorful figures of the Tokugawa era; even today their outfits are easily recognized by most Japanese through the countless plays and movies about their lives. They wore hats of sedge that almost covered their faces, caped overcoats that flapped in the wind as they walked, straw sandals and gaiters, a strapped pair of bundles slung over their shoulders, and a single sword at their side (as opposed to the two blades worn by samurai).

Ritual and custom pervaded the life of the bakuto, and the travelers were no exception. Upon arrival at the house of the oyabun, the traveler introduced himself, using archaic Japanese, to the kobun answering the door. "I was born in so-and-so place. I am so-and-so of the so-and-so group. I am a humble man, and as we have now made acquaintance, I would like you to support me from today onwards." The traveler then presented a hand towel to the kobun as a gift and, according to etiquette, it would be returned with a small amount of money and the phrase, "Your courtesy is enough appreciation." In exchange for his meals, the traveler would do menial tasks in the oyabun's house, such as cleaning or drawing bath water from the well. The boss, for his part, would treat the traveler as his guest. In the event the traveler was a wanted man—which was often the case—the oyabun would take responsibility for sheltering him.

The Gambler as Hero

The bakuto in general, and the travelers in particular, became the basis for the leading characters in the *matabi-mono* (stories of wandering gamblers), a genre of Japanese literature that has enjoyed great popularity since the early 1900s. Among the authors was Shin Hasegawa, a pulp novelist whose widely read works beginning around 1912 turned the yakuza into popular heroes. His stories depicted the gamblers as faithful and humane people, men whose loneliness and sorrow few outsiders could understand. Like Goro Fujita's novels of seventy years later, Hasegawa's stories portrayed men

of questionable backgrounds who fought as hard as they gambled, yet maintained a philosophy of supporting the underdog and never troubling the common folk. Above all, they remained loyal to those who helped them. A virtuous traveler would be willing to sacrifice his life for the oyabun who for one day had opened the gang's home to him.

The aggressive yet compassionate outlaw, useless to mainstream society but willing to stand up for the common man—these are the essential components of the yakuza legend. It is a tradition inherited not only from the machi-yakko but from the samurai as well, and it spread through the feudal underworld.

The yakuza were especially keen on the values embodied in *bushido*, the much-heralded code of the samurai. Like the warriors, they would prove their manliness by the stoic endurance of pain, hunger, or imprisonment. Violent death for the yakuza, as for the samurai, was a poetic, tragic, and honorable fate. But the value system developed by the early yakuza endured because it went far beyond a mere reflection of the samurai's code. At its heart rested the concepts of *giri* and *ninjo*, two terms not easily translated into English. The ideas behind *giri* and *ninjo* had a formidable impact on the samurai and continue to exert a powerful influence on Japanese society at large.

Giri loosely means obligation or a strong sense of duty, and is tied up with complex Japanese values involving loyalty, gratitude, and moral debt. In a sense, *giri* is the social cloth that binds much of Japan together; its observance figures centrally in such matters as the oyabun-kobun system. Still, such explanations fall short of conveying the intricacies implied by the word. Ruth Benedict, in her classic 1946 account of Japanese culture, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, cited the country's old saying that "Giri is hardest to bear." Wrote Benedict, "There is no possible English equivalent and of all the strange categories of moral obligations which anthropologists find in the cultures of the world, it is one of the most curious. It is specifically Japanese." The obligations encompassed by *giri* range from "gratitude for an old kindness to the duty of revenge."

Ninjo is roughly equivalent to "human feeling" or "emotion." Among its many interpretations is generosity or sympathy toward the weak and disadvantaged, and empathy toward others. It is typically used in conjunction with *giri*, and the tension created by these two forces—obligation versus compassion—forms a central theme in Japanese literature. By adopting *giri-ninjo*, the yakuza greatly enhanced their standing in society, showing that, like the best samurai, they could combine compassion and kindness with their martial skills.

Among those who follow the yakuza there is a spirited debate about whether these old values still exist. The oyabun of Japan's great syndicates, cast in their Confucian-like roles as teachers and preservers of tradition, are

outspoken on the yakuza's position. In a 1984 interview, Kakuji Inagawa of the Inagawa family, at the time Japan's most respected oyabun, put it this way: "The yakuza are trying to pursue the road of chivalry and patriotism. That's our biggest difference with the American Mafia, it's our sense of *giri* and *ninjo*. The yakuza try to take care of all society if possible, even if it takes 1 million yen to help a single person." A ranking boss from the rival Sumiyoshi syndicate agreed: "In the winter we give the sunny half of the street to the common people because we survive on their work. In the summer we yakuza walk on the sunny side, to give them the cool, shaded half. If you look at our actions, you can see our strong commitment to *giri-ninjo*."

Nowhere do the old values shine brighter than in the tale of Shimizu no Jirocho (Jirocho of Shimizu). This is the story, taught to millions of Japanese children, about the man who is undoubtedly the country's most famous gangster.

Jirocho was the third son of a sailor, born, according to legend, on New Year's Day of 1820 in the thriving seaport of Shimizu. His hometown lay along the great Tokaido Highway, on a stretch between Tokyo and what was then a quiet fishing village called Yokohama. Because of a local superstition that New Year's babies grew up to be either great geniuses or hopeless villains, his father took no chances and gave the boy up for adoption by a wealthy relative. As a young boy, Jirocho was a terror, but eventually he settled down to become a model rice merchant in his adoptive father's business.

Soon his father died, however, and at sixteen Jirocho inherited the business. There he stayed until age twenty, when one day he encountered a wandering monk standing in his doorway. The monk warned him he would die before his twenty-sixth birthday, a prediction Jirocho took to heart. Jirocho, by then bored with his job, considered joining up with the bands of gamblers that flourished in Shimizu and up and down the Tokaido. After a drunken brawl with local hoodlums, he finally left his wife and business, and took to the road for three years as a "traveler." During that time he made a name for himself as an exceptional fighter, mediator, and leader of men.

Upon returning to Shimizu, he set about organizing his own gang, and soon attracted gamblers and would-be gamblers from miles around: there were street toughs, construction workers, ronin; Jirocho put together the classic bakuto gang. According to one account, at his peak he commanded an army of six hundred gamblers and held sway over the heartland of the Tokaido, stretching along eight coastal stations from the Fuji River near Tokyo to the Oi River toward Kyoto. Jirocho's men, in fact, became the law of the land along their stretch of the Tokaido, for the Tokugawa police were often undisciplined and notoriously corrupt. Under Jirocho's able leader-

ship, his men would fight heroic battles against dishonorable gamblers and thieves, and guard the common people against the brutal ways of the samurai and their lords.

Jirocho's heyday spanned the turbulent years of the mid-nineteenth century in Japan. The Tokugawa shogunate was in decline, weakened by assaults from every side: there were powerful nobles and merchants who wanted change and recognition; foreign navies demanding that the country open its doors to the West; repeated uprisings by an oppressed peasantry; and a growing hostility from the imperial court in Kyoto, whose own power over Japan was fast increasing. A mighty movement was gaining strength to install the emperor as actual head of state. (His role heretofore had been largely symbolic.) Among its supporters were those who hoped to keep the nation closed to foreigners, for the shogun had bowed to Commodore Perry's demands in 1854 and was gradually opening Japan's ports to the West. Spouting the slogan "Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians," these traditionalists would inadvertently hasten the end of over two hundred years of isolation, for the emperor would swing Japan's doors open far wider than the shogun ever did.

This was to be the final chapter of the Tokugawa era, the end of Japan's long immersion in feudalism. It was in these confused final days of near civil war that Jirocho, like many yakuza, finally chose sides, lending his support to help enshrine the emperor as the divine ruler of the Japanese islands. The motivation was not ideological: gamblers that they were, the bakuto were merely playing the odds, hoping to win political advantage from the victors.

Jirocho's gamble was a wise one, for all his past crimes were pardoned, and he became a powerful man in his community. The bakuto boss promoted improvements in farming, fishing, and the development of the city of Shimizu. In keeping with the new surge toward modernization, Jirocho started one of Japan's first English schools. To the likely amazement of his old colleagues, he even established a penitentiary. His followers, meanwhile, continued to keep order and run the gambling games in the region.

Jirocho died in 1893 at the age of seventy-three. Thousands today still visit his grave each year, where he lies buried with his followers in a local temple. It is said that at the foot of Mount Fuji there stands still another monument to the old outlaw, a Shinto shrine dedicated to Jirocho, built by farmers who work the land he once reclaimed.

That, more or less, is how Japan's most famous yakuza has been depicted in countless ballads and tales over the years. But not everyone agrees with the legend. Among the dissenters is Japan's prestigious newspaper, the *Asahi Shimbun*, which ran a story in January 1975 entitled "'Robin Hood' of Shimizu Was Nothing but a Thug." According to old administrative documents discovered in a town next to Shimizu, says the story, Jirocho, far from in-

spiring worship among the people, “was in truth nothing but a gangster who oppressed the farmers.” The documents reveal that Jirocho, who was entrusted to rule over the area by the government, remained a gang boss at heart, controlling Shimizu through violence and intimidation. Like most of the world’s great outlaws, Jirocho is best remembered through legend, not history.

The Yakuza Modernize

The forces of historical change swirling around Jirocho’s life climaxed in 1867, when, bowing to the inevitable, the fifteenth and final shogun of the Tokugawa family resigned and was replaced by the young Emperor Meiji. It was the dawn of the Meiji Restoration, in which all the pent-up commercial and intellectual power of Japan would be released and the Japanese would perform their first economic miracle, breaking the last bonds of feudalism and swiftly transforming their country into an industrial power.

By the turn of the century, Japan had evolved into a complex, rapidly modernizing society populated by some 45 million people. Between 1890 and 1914, the country’s total industrial production doubled, while its share of factories more than tripled. Politically, too, the country was fast changing. The Japanese witnessed the birth and maturation of their first parliament and political parties, and the growth of a powerful, autonomous military that would invade China, annex Korea, and in 1905 defeat the Russians in war.

As the country modernized, the yakuza expanded their activities in step with the growing economy. The gangs gained a foothold in organizing casual laborers for construction jobs in the big cities and in recruiting stevedores for the booming business on the docks. Also, with the introduction of the metal wheel, the underworld influenced control of the new carts, called rickshaws, which by 1900 numbered 50,000 in Tokyo alone.

Gambling remained the center of life for the bakuto gangs, although better police control forced them to take their games farther underground into urban hideaways and private haunts. Many bosses started legitimate businesses to act as fronts for the gangs’ rackets and began an enduring custom of making payoffs to local police. The tekiya also maintained their traditional livelihood, the street stalls. The peddlers were able to expand their territory more easily, for unlike the gamblers, they worked in a legal trade. Determined police efforts, however, were making it clear to both groups that the all-out open brawls and territorial wars of the past would be far less tolerated in the new state.

The bakuto and tekiya gangs also continued to play politics, and gradually some gangs developed close ties to important officials. These gangs wanted some measure of government sanction, or at least freedom from

government harassment, and saw cooperation as the key. On the other side, the government continued to find uses for the organized gangs, as it had since before Jirocho's day.

At first, the use of this muscle was somewhat haphazard, as it had been with Jirocho's men, and ideology had little to do with the association between politician and hit man. It remained as pure opportunism on both sides. There was always a strongly conservative cast to the relationship, but late in the nineteenth century that conservatism began to veer to the right. Japan now began its climb to militarism abroad and its descent into repression at home, for just as the nation began experimenting with democracy, an ominous new force was being born—the ultranationalists.

Patriotic Gangsters

Modern ultranationalism, the force behind Japan's swing to the extreme right, harks back to the 1880s. It was first defined in Kyushu, the southernmost of the four major islands, and at the time a poor fishing and coal mining region. Kyushu was home to a large community of disgruntled ex-samurai, many of whom had taken part in rebellions against the new social order. The discontent of these soldiers was exploited by patriots and politicians critical of the new regime's corruption and disregard of tradition. Particularly affected was the city of Fukuoka, in the corner of the island closest to the Asian mainland. The city developed into a breeding ground for antigovernment thought, and within a few years became the center of a new militarism and patriotism in Japan.

Out of Fukuoka emerged a leader who would forever change the course of both organized crime and politics in Japan, joining those two forces together in a way that would endure to the present day. He was Mitsuru Toyama, born the third son to a family of obscure samurai rank. Information on his early years is difficult to verify. It is said that Toyama spent his childhood in poverty, peddling sweet potatoes on the streets of Fukuoka, and developed into a tough, streetwise teenager who idolized the samurai tradition.

By the time Toyama reached his twenties, his activities turned political. He took part in one of the final samurai uprisings, earning a three-year jail sentence from the Meiji government. Upon his release, the young patriot enlisted in his first nationalist group, the *Kyoshisha* (Pride and Patriotism Society), and for the first time began to gather a following. Toyama took to the streets and set about organizing the listless toughs of Fukuoka. His men became both a disciplined workforce and a tough fighting force used to keep labor unrest at a minimum in the region's coal mines.

Like others before him, Toyama gained a reputation as a local Robin Hood, handing out money to his followers on the streets of Fukuoka with-

out bothering to count it. He became known as “Emperor of the Slums” and earned the respect of local politicians, who knew and feared his frequent use of violence.

Toyama’s rise to national power came with his founding of the Genyosha, or Dark Ocean Society, in 1881. Genyosha, a federation of nationalist societies, would be the forerunner of Japan’s modern secret societies and patriotic groups. The articles of its charter were vague: revere the emperor, love and respect the nation, and defend the people’s rights. The ambitious Toyama, however, knew exactly what the organization was about—tapping directly into the powerful sentiment among the ex-samurai for expansion abroad and authoritarian rule at home. Even the name Dark Ocean suggested expansion, symbolizing to Toyama and his followers the narrow passage of water separating Japan from Korea and China.

It was Toyama who foresaw and formed, almost single-handedly, a new patriotic social order that would be used as a paramilitary force in Japanese politics. Through a campaign of terror, blackmail, and assassination, the Dark Ocean Society’s work would prove highly effective, exerting particular influence over members of the officer corps and the government bureaucracy and playing an instrumental role in sweeping Japan into East Asia and, ultimately, into war with the United States.

Genyosha members worked as bodyguards for government officials, as strong-arm persuaders for local political bosses, and as skilled laborers in legitimate jobs—as plumbers, carpenters, masons—in unions affiliated with the society and its successors. These new yakuza considered themselves at the opposite end of the underworld spectrum from the bakuto and tekiya, as high-class gangsters imbued with the righteousness of Toyama’s superpatriotic politics.

The society’s agents were sent abroad to China, Korea, and Manchuria as spies. They operated schools where an entire generation of ultranationalists were trained. Through studies in the martial arts, foreign language, and spying techniques, Genyosha graduates formed the basis of a sophisticated intelligence network created by the Japanese prior to World War II.

In Japan, Toyama deployed his men with equal skill. They were used to foment or subdue public unrest, intimidate both political candidates and voters, suppress dissident laborers, and punish anyone of whom their bosses disapproved. The Dark Ocean Society and its ilk were especially useful to mining and manufacturing companies, who employed them not only as strikebreakers but as hired political muscle who helped promote or shatter the careers of would-be politicians.

Toyama and his Dark Ocean followers held a larger agenda, however. Using money gained from their growing rackets, Toyama launched a campaign of terror and assassination aimed at achieving a new social order in Japan. Genyosha activists hurled a bomb into the carriage of Foreign Min-

ister Shigenobu Okuma, who lost a leg to the explosion; stabbed the liberal politician Taisuke Itagaki; and murdered Toshimichi Okubo, perhaps the Meiji era's most brilliant statesman.

The year 1892 saw a new phenomenon in Japan: a national election. Toyama and company greeted it with the first large-scale cooperation between rightists and the underworld. The society, already making deals with conservatives inside the Meiji government, launched a violent campaign in support of like-minded incumbents.

Fearing that his forces might not be adequate, Toyama called on the leader of a gang in nearby Kumamoto, who sent three hundred of his men to Fukuoka as reinforcements. This combined force was joined by the local police, who had been mobilized by none other than the minister of home affairs to assist the gangsters in harassing antigovernment opponents. The result was the bloodiest election in Japanese history, with scores dead and hundreds wounded. Genyosha, for its part, stated openly in its official account that the purpose of the Fukuoka campaign was to uproot all democratic and liberal organizations in the region.

Genyosha's next mission was more ambitious. Toyama, acting on a secret request from the minister of war, was to "start a fire" in Korea, creating a pretext for Japanese troops to move in. In 1895, a squad of Genyosha agents, trained as assassin-spies in the martial arts of the *ninja*, infiltrated the Korean Imperial Palace and murdered the queen. This act, in part, precipitated Japan's invasion of that country. The Japanese would not leave for fifty years.

From then on, ultranationalism became a more or less permanent fixture on the political landscape. The Dark Ocean Society provided the model for hundreds of secret societies reaching into every corner of Japan and, eventually, through much of East Asia as well. They sported such colorful names as the Blood Pledge Corps, the Loyalist Sincerity Group, the Farmers' Death-Defying Corps, and the Association for Heavenly Action. Some groups were supported by wealthy patrons; others financed their work through an array of crimes that today still form the daily bread of yakuza gangs: gambling, prostitution, protection rackets, strikebreaking, blackmail, and control of labor recruiting, entertainment, and street peddling. The secret societies attracted the bosses of local tekiya and bakuto groups and began a process that a hundred years later would continue to blur the distinction between gangsters and rightists in the minds of Japanese.

Initially, the more traditional yakuza groups had no real ideology and seemed to stand at some distance from the Genyosha and its successors. But the similarities among them were very strong. All shared a mystical worldview that worshipped power, resented foreigners and foreign ideas (especially liberalism and socialism), revered a romanticized past, observed Shinto as the core of their belief systems, and deified the emperor as a liv-

ing Shinto god. Equally important was structure: the groups traditionally organized along rigid oyabun-kobun lines and used similar ceremonies to tighten those ties. Many of the ultranationalist groups, then as now, were often nothing more than gangs of violent thugs whose “patriotic” purpose tended to be as much financial as political.

Ultimately, these social patterns produced virtually identical politics among most rightists and gangsters. Local gang bosses—whether they controlled dockworkers, street stalls, or village politics—realized that the entire basis of their authority was threatened by left-wing attacks on traditional society. With the emergence of a noticeable left and labor movement at the turn of the century, this understandable fear among the oyabun made them easy converts to the new ultranationalism.

Among the groups that the yakuza found appealing was a successor of Genyosha called Kokuryu-kai, or the Amur River Society, founded in 1901 by Toyama’s right-hand man, Ryohei Uchida. The name of this secretive group hinted at its purpose: the expansion of Japanese power to the Amur River, the boundary between Manchuria and Russia. The group would become far better known by a different title, however: the characters for the name Kokuryu-kai could also be read as the “Black Dragon Society,” a name that caught the fancy of Western journalists.

The ultimate objective of the Black Dragons was no less than the domination and control of all Asia. To the more fanatic visionaries, the society was destined for the calling of Hakkō-ichi-u—the Eight Corners of the World under One Roof. The roof, of course, was that of the Emperor of Japan, descended from the Sun God in an unbroken line. The Black Dragon Society became the natural successor to Toyama’s Dark Ocean, taking over its followers, its policies, and its goals. Under the patronage and guidance of Toyama, it would push Japan into a victorious war with Russia, commit political assassinations, and do for China what the Dark Ocean activists had done for Korea—help create the conditions for a Japanese invasion. For some thirty years the organization flourished, exhorting the Japanese to wage a holy war against capitalism, bolshevism, democracy, and the West. Through it all, Toyama and Uchida would reign as the Marx and Lenin of the Japanese ultranationalist movement.

The 1920s, the so-called period of Taisho democracy, represented the peak of Japan’s prewar liberalism. Despite a political climate plagued by assassination, police repression, and an increasingly renegade military, the country continued to prosper. Universal suffrage was introduced, labor unions grew, and, spurred on by further economic growth, the middle class greatly expanded. But ominously in the background stood Toyama, who had continued to increase in stature. The patriot was courted by leading politicians, and even received money from the imperial family.

Toyama’s next underworld achievement—the first national federation

of gangsters—occurred in 1919, with the formation of the Dai Nippon Kokusui-kai (Great Japan National Essence Society). This organization of more than 60,000 gangsters, laborers, and ultranationalists was the brainchild of Toyama and Takejiro Tokunami, then minister of home affairs. The new federation fit neatly into the mold set nearly forty years earlier by Toyama's Dark Ocean Society. Its platform spoke vaguely of honoring the emperor, the "spirit of chivalry," and ancient Japanese values. Practically, however, the Kokusui-kai served as a massive strikebreaking force and introduced an unprecedented level of violence into the ultranationalist movement. Headed by Tokunami himself, with Toyama as chief adviser, the organization functioned quite similarly to its Fascist contemporaries in Italy—Mussolini's Black Shirts. The Kokusui-kai operated with the strong support of the Home Ministry, the police, and certain high-ranking military officials. Its numbers were deployed not only against strikers but also against any target deemed subversive by Toyama and friends. Among the group's many actions was an attack on the 28,000 men who had walked out in the great 1920 Yawata Iron Works strike. The Kokusui-kai gangs worked side by side with police, military gendarmes, firemen, veterans, and muscle men of other ultranationalist groups to break the strike.

Tokunami's Kokusui-kai evolved into the paramilitary arm of the Seiyu-kai, one of the two dominant political parties of the day. By the end of the decade Seiyu-kai's principal opposition, the Minseito Party, had organized its own gangster force: the Yamato Minro-kai, filled with yakuza also drawn largely from construction gangs. So integrated into their respective political parties did these gangs become that more than a few bosses ran successfully for national office. Their presence in the Diet, Japan's parliament, was but another sign that all did not bode well for Japan's future.

By the 1930s, rightist groups had proliferated tremendously. The country was destabilized as moderate politicians fell victim to assassination or withdrew completely from public life. From 1930 until the end of the war, Japanese police would officially record a total of twenty-nine rightist "incidents." Among them were attempted coups d'état by military officers and ultranationalists and repeated attacks on leading politicians and industrialists—including the assassinations of two prime ministers and two finance ministers.

Toyama's star continued to rise through the tumultuous 1930s as the practice of democracy nearly vanished in Japan. The aging leader, now possessing great prestige and wealth, arranged cabinets as well as assassinations. He was invited to dinners at the imperial palace and at ultranationalist societies. He addressed key patriotic gatherings, at which he would invariably be asked to lead the three cheers for the emperor. Symbolic of Toyama's

new power was his introduction to the Japanese of their new prime minister, Prince Konoe, before a crowd of 18,000 in 1937. With many of Toyama's allies now in power, the country slid deeper into a decade of repression known to many Japanese as *Kuroi Tanima*, the Dark Valley. As the Nazis seized control in Germany and the Fascists rose to power in Italy, a ruthless militarism erupted in Japan. Every sector of society was organized for political regimentation and indoctrination. The era was at hand of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, in which Japanese might would sweep over the Western colonies of the Orient. To the aging Toyama and his fellow ultranationalists, their dream was coming true.

The varied *yakuza* and strong-arm gangs continued to contribute men and muscle to the patriotic cause. *Yakuza* groups cooperated with the militarists by going to occupied Manchuria or China to participate in "land development" programs. For Japan's gangs, the exploitation of resource-rich Manchuria meant open season on the Chinese. It was, as one scholar put it, "the heyday of the *yakuza*, a return to the good old days of feudalism." Among the vocations attractive to the gangs was assisting the government's Opium Monopoly Bureau in its dual job of making money and weakening public resistance by fostering drug addiction. It was a page taken from British colonial handbooks of a century earlier, and the Japanese employed it skillfully. The military estimated its revenue from Japan's narcotization policy in China at \$300 million a year. (Note: All yen-to-dollar conversions are given in rates current at the time.) When not spent on graft and corruption, the money went into the industrial development of the occupied lands.

Outside their political pursuits, the more traditional *yakuza* gangs were busy expanding their financial base at home. Military expansion brought more money into Japan, and the *yakuza* were well situated to grab a large share of the booty. Like Tokunami's labor bosses and their construction gangs, the *yakuza* organized the laborers along Japan's waterfronts. In the port city of Kobe, for instance, *yakuza* gangs gathered up groups of otherwise unemployable men and sold their labor cheaply to longshore firms in need of docile, unskilled workers. So lucrative was this racket that various *oyabun* fought over contracts and territories. The Kobe group that emerged victorious was the Yamaguchi-gumi, under the able leadership of Kazuo Taoka. Over the next quarter-century, he would transform his waterfront gang into the largest *yakuza* syndicate in Japan, reaching a peak of more than 13,000 members in thirty-six of Japan's forty-seven prefectures. (A prefecture is roughly equivalent to a U.S. state.) The infamous Yamaguchi syndicate would become a household word in Japan, and Taoka the undisputed godfather of Japanese crime.

While Taoka was organizing the docks and laying the ground for the future of the *yakuza*, a remarkably similar process was occurring in the United States. The Lucky Luciano mob had taken over much of the Manhattan

and Brooklyn waterfronts, acting through “Tough” Tony Anastasia and Joe “Socks” Lanza, and work on the docks functioned in an almost oyabun-kobun fashion. So tightly did the mob control the waterfront that during the war, the Office of Naval Intelligence felt it prudent to make a deal with Luciano, then in a New York prison, to make sure the docks remained free of saboteurs.

In other respects, though, the American mob had outstripped its Japanese counterparts. Despite the widespread integration of gangsters into the ultranationalist movement, city or neighborhood gangs were still the rule in Japan. American gangs, meanwhile, flush with the huge cash reserves generated by liquor sales during Prohibition, were growing into a sophisticated national syndicate. Equally important, U.S. gangsters were learning how to invest their newfound capital and manage it according to modern corporate practice. These historic changes came about when Luciano joined forces with the gangsters under Meyer Lansky and Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel and, for the first time, organized crime moved beyond strictly ethnic groupings. These New York gangsters combined with Cleveland’s Mayfield Road Gang, Detroit’s Purple Gang, the Chicago mob, and others to apportion large sections of the country for specific rackets, such as gambling, drugs, and labor racketeering. By the 1930s, the mob was so strong a force that it had influence in presidential elections.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor, however, changed life radically for both the U.S. and Japanese Mafias. With the advent of war with the West, the Japanese government’s love affair with the far right and the yakuza came to an abrupt end. The wartime government, having moved as far to the right as big business and the army wished, no longer needed the rightists or gangsters as an independent force. Upper-echelon rightists either worked for the government or were imprisoned. Likewise, yakuza either put on a uniform or saw the war from the inside of a cell. Among those spending time in prison was the waterfront boss Kazuo Taoka, who passed his time reading books about Toyama and the Dark Ocean Society.

Mitsuru Toyama finally died in 1944 at the age of eighty-nine, but not before seeing his beloved Japan conquer much of Asia and the Pacific. His influence would live on through innumerable gangster-rightist organizations, and two generations later his portrait adorns the walls of nearly all rightist offices and of many yakuza ones as well. Unfortunately, this grand old man of the Japanese right did not see the final result of his long years of militancy, as the war thrust Japan to both the height and depth of its political power, all within four years. By August 1945, the Americans had dropped the atom bomb and the Soviets had invaded Manchuria, and within a few days the Japanese had finally had enough.