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Westernization and cultural resistance in tattooing practices in contemporary Japan

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ABSTRACT ● This article examines the popular culture of tattooing in Japan and sheds light on attempts by traditional tattooists to retain a vital presence in the modern-to-postmodern transitional periods. Explaining the values, beliefs and practices associated with tattooing during the pre-modern period, it discusses how these are shaped and modified by modern cultural practices, and how they are being impacted by globalization. While drawing on historical and cross-cultural research on tattooing in Japan, this article incorporates three tattooists' experiences as examples of contemporary practices. By resisting the impact of globalization, traditional tattooists preserve their own practices and pass them on to the next generation. ●

KEYWORDS ● authenticity ● cultural resistance ● Japan ● marginality ● popular culture ● subculture ● tattoo ● tattooing ● westernization

The recent popularity of tattoos has created polarized attitudes toward tattooing practices in Japan. On the one hand, more tattooists and tattooees openly present themselves as members of a tattoo culture in which tattoos are considered marks of self-expression. On the other hand, it is evident that negative views of tattoos remain strong. The sign, 'No Tattooed People Allowed', is overtly displayed in public places such as saunas and pools, even though tattooing is not illegal. Due to historical and sociocultural conditions, tattoos were often associated with criminal activities (e.g. tattooing was a gangster custom) and rebellion against society (e.g. going against Confucian teaching). This negativity surrounding Japanese tattooing still persists.

As a result, the popularity of tattoos may also confuse Japanese tattooists. The appearance of tattoo conventions in Japan suggests that tattooing has gained the

status of a subculture and popular culture, but also reveals ambivalent attitudes toward the trend. While it is more openly accepted by tattoo enthusiasts, Japanese tattooists sometimes find this openness problematic. At the Tokyo Tattoo Convention in 2000, for example, the traditional tattoo masters did not communicate with each other, and one of them reported that, even though they know each other, they don't exchange greetings in public (Yamada, 2001). It seemed that those tattooists avoided overt participation. If they feel more at ease and liberated to express themselves as tattooists, why do the tattooists at the convention maintain their traditional stances?

In this article, I examine the popular culture of tattooing in Japan and shed light on attempts by traditional tattooists to retain a vital presence in the modern-to-postmodern transitional period. Describing the values, beliefs and practices associated with tattooing during the pre-modern or feudal periods, I explore how these were shaped and modified by modern cultural practices and how they are being impacted by globalization and postmodern values and practices. While focusing on historical and cross-cultural research on Japanese tattooing, this article also presents interviews with three master tattooists.

Many studies of Japanese popular culture explain tensions and contradictions between Japanese tradition and Western cultures (Atkins, 2000; Grigsby, 1998; Ivy, 1993; Maynard, 1997; Yamada, 2008) and the intertwined nature of globalization and localization (Hosokawa, 1999). For instance, by studying how a Japanese salsa band recreates the cultural authenticity of Latin American music, Hosokawa (1999) discusses the way both global forces and local conditions shape current cultural practices. More broadly, Möhwald (2000) argues that value change is not the substitution of new values for old ones, but a change in the emphasis of various values, and a pluralization and differentiation of value patterns. Thus, Japanese traditional values are not necessarily lost, but multiple realities exist in contemporary society (Möhwald, 2000; Yamada, 2008). Based on these arguments, the existence of Japanese traditions and the influence of Western cultural practices explain polarized attitudes toward tattooing in Japan.

Tattooing, as one of the most indigenous practices surviving in contemporary societies, represents the complex nature of globalization, not only in transitions from modern to postmodern periods, but also in the unique intersection of pre-modern practices with modernity and postmodernity. In contemporary societies, traditional practices struggle to remain vital and true to their historical heritage in a changing cultural context. I suggest that the marginality of Japanese tattooing gives it vitality and a sense of authenticity, which keeps the Japanese tattoo tradition alive in contemporary society.

Although much literature on Japanese tattoos is available, it tends to focus on its history and cultural uniqueness (Gilbert, 2000; Iizawa, 1973; Mansfield, 1999; McCallum, 1988; Poysden and Bratt, 2006; Richie, 1980; Tamabayashi, 1956; Van Gulik, 1982; Yoshioka, 1996), social meanings of Japanese tattoo culture (Richie, 1980) and tribal customs (Glacken, 1955; Haring, 1969; Takayama, 1969; Yoshioka, 1996). None of the studies examines conflicts

and tension emerging from the intersection of pre-modern and modern/postmodern practices. Hence, this article provides a deeper understanding of the cultural complexity of Japanese tattooing practices in historical and socio-cultural contexts.

A concise history of tattooing practices in Japan

To discuss the intersectionality of pre-modern cultural practices with modern and postmodern tattooing practices in Japan, it is important to outline the meanings associated with Japanese tattoos over time. The traditional Japanese-style of tattooing known as 'full body suits' was developed after the mid 18th century during the Edo period¹ (McCallum, 1988; Tamabayashi, 1956; Yoshioka, 1996). A tattoo in this style covers the entire body, and the design is inspired by ukiyo-e pictures, Japanese traditional woodblock prints, each stemming from specific motives and imparting specific meanings. One of the most common patterns is called *munawari* and resembles an unbuttoned vest (Van Gulik, 1982). Traditionally, Japanese tattooing was done by *tebori*, i.e. hand-tattooing, which required the tattooee to spend time and endure pain in order to complete the full body tattoo.

Kishobori, or a vow tattoo, was practiced among lovers, geishas (i.e., refined professional entertainers) and *yujos* (i.e., playgirls and prostitutes), to express a pledge of their love by tattooing their lover's (or client's) name and the Japanese character for life on the inside of the arm (Seigle, 1993; Tamabayashi, 1956; Van Gulik, 1982). Along with the development of the ukiyo-e picture, tattooing became widely popular, particularly among the working class, and the tattooed body was considered as stylish as 'the flower of the Edo' or 'the spirited or courageous skin' (Yoshioka, 1996: 85).

Besides commoners, crime syndicates also adopted tattooing as their custom. Japan's criminal organizations, the *yakuza*, started the practice during Japan's feudal era (Kaplan and Dubro, 2003). Many *yakuzas* who decided to devote their lives to the underground society were tattooed as proof of their commitment, loyalty and faithfulness toward it. Parallel to the popularity of pictorial tattooing, tattooing was also used to distinguish criminals and social outcasts during the same period (Tamabayashi, 1956; Yoshioka, 1996). Perhaps the *yakuza*'s tattoos were originally marks of punishment for crimes. In the feudal era, the term *horimono* was used to indicate tattooing in general, while *irezumi* meant punitive tattooing (Tamabayashi, 1956; Yoshioka, 1996). Because of the negative connotation of *irezumi*, Japanese traditional tattooists prefer to use the term *horimono*.

Tattooing occurred as a tribal custom among the Ainu, an indigenous Japanese people living in Hokkaido. The Ainu women were tattooed around the lips, cheeks, and the forehead or eyebrows (Takayama, 1969; Yoshioka, 1996). Several reasons for Ainu tattoos are frequently reported: body adornment, indication of sexual maturity and religious expression. Women in

Ryukyu, the present Okinawa prefecture, also had tattoos on the back of the hands, the wrists and the knuckles (Glacken, 1955; Haring, 1969; Yoshioka, 1996). Similarly, the motivations for the Ryukyu tattoos included religious beliefs, indication of sexual maturity, marital symbols, body decoration, distinction of sex, and therapeutic purposes (Yoshioka, 1996).

In the same feudal era, lifestyle, dress and custom, including tattooing practices, were frequently restricted or prohibited by the authorities (Tamabayashi, 1956). This social oppression created a Japanese cultural expression, called *iki* or stylishness. As a rebellion against the superior class, tattooing was thus continuously practiced as a sense of *iki*, as well as in a spirit of competition among commoners (Tamabayashi, 1956; Yoshioka, 1996).

Finally, the Meiji Restoration (1868) marked the beginning of modernization in Japan. The feudal system was abolished, and the Japanese were immediately exposed to new concepts and ideas from the West. As modernization advanced, tattooing practices became signs of barbarism and were officially banned until the end of the Second World War (Tamabayashi, 1956; Yoshioka, 1996). Because of this, tattooing became an underground deviant craft in Japanese society.

As a result, the rise of modernization and westernization changed the Japanese lifestyle, including the view of the body and tattoos. Before modernization was introduced to Japan, nudity did not necessarily imply eroticism or sexuality, but rather was a part of Japanese daily life (Nomura, 1990). For instance, occupations such as rickshaw men, fisher people, firemen, and *ama* (women divers) used to be semi-naked when they worked. Some were tattooed but others were not. Their tattoos symbolized their courage and pride as well as their occupations. Another example of nakedness is *hadaka matsuri*, or naked festivals, in which male participants wear only loincloths, and the tattooed men carry *omikoshi* – portable shinto shrines – on their shoulders through the streets on festival days (Mansfield, 1999; Nomura, 1990). Moreover, in earlier periods, when people did not have a bathtub in their homes, they usually took a public bath, and tattoo wearers would take more time for a bath to proudly show their tattoos.

However, the enforcement of wearing clothes and the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition perhaps affected Japanese perceptions about being naked in public (Nomura, 1990). In Western visitors' eyes, it was un-godly and heathenishly uncivilized to see nudity in public places. Since the exposure of the naked body in public was forbidden by law as early as 1871, being naked in public has become a source of shame in people's consciousness (Nomura, 1990). In this sense, this Western influence consequently led to the secretive practice of Japanese tattooing.

Tattooing in contemporary Japan

Today tattoos are again considered fashionable in Japan following the 'global tattoo trend' (McCabe, 2005: 11). The fascination with the West, especially US

culture, has increased the popularity of tattoos. For instance, US pop music greatly influences Japanese youth culture. McCabe (2005) reports that the hip-hop culture attracts many people in Japan, and its styles – including clothes, accessories, haircuts and tattoos – are often mimicked. Furthermore, Japanese celebrities with tattoos appear in the media, and young people tend to follow their styles (Bradshaw, 2007; Tokyo Broadcasting System, 1999). To discuss some aspects of the Western influence on Japanese tattooing practices, Yamada (2008) explains that Japanese international students living in Canada report that it was their overseas experiences, more or less, that motivated them to be tattooed. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that Japanese travelers may accept the idea of being tattooed as a form of self-expression and bring it back to Japan.

As a consequence of this movement, the Western-influenced type of tattooing called ‘one-point tattoos’, meaning to get only one tattoo, has become accepted within Japanese tattooing practices (Bradshaw, 2007; McCabe, 2005); other body arts, such as piercing and the temporary tattoo (tattoo stickers), are popular, particularly among the young (Bradshaw, 2007; McCabe, 2005; Mori, 1999; Saito, 1997; ‘Tattoos ...’, 1994; Tokyo Broadcasting System, 1999). Moreover, tattoo design books, magazines and CD materials have been published in increasing numbers (Bradshaw, 2007; Mansfield, 1999; McCabe, 2005), and tattoo-related events have attracted both local Japanese and overseas tattoo enthusiasts (McCabe, 2005; Okazaki, 2007).

Tattooing and other types of body modification have become a means to assert self-determination, self-expression and identity. Some young Japanese choose to be tattooed as a form of art, fashion and lifestyle choice, and others are tattooed to keep their memories on the skin (Yamada, 2008). In addition, tattooing is also accepted to cover up one’s physical status. Some customers have tattoos to cover bruises and scars (Tokyo Broadcasting System, 1999; Yamada, 2008).

Concomitantly, this Western influence results in contradiction and conflict. A newspaper article (‘Moto ...’, 1997) points out social meanings attached to tattoos, reporting that greater numbers of *yakuzas* try to remove their stigmatized tattoos to conform to mainstream society, while tattooing has gained the status of a subculture. The number of *yakuza* clients, who were once the majority of tattooees, has declined since the tattoo boom (McCabe, 2005; Okazaki, 2007). Interestingly, those young people who accept the one-point tattoo resembling the *kishobori* tattoo do not intentionally choose traditional tattoos, but tend to seek Western-style tattoos and motifs. In this sense, the traditional meanings may have been obscured by the influence of Western cultures.

This Western influence also creates parallel attitudes among Japanese tattooists. On the one hand, contemporary tattooists who offer the Western style of tattooing openly run businesses, putting out their signboards, and advertising their addresses and tattooing capabilities in tattoo magazines. On the other hand, traditional tattooists who specialize in classic designs and techniques do not publicize their addresses and phone numbers, and rarely accept new customers without an introduction (McCabe, 2005; Okazaki, 2007). Consequently, tensions and contradictions have emerged

between contemporary tattooists who pursue new styles of tattooing and traditionalists who strictly preserve their cultural institution. These polarized attitudes within subcultural practices may be understood as the consequence of globalization.

Theoretical framework – Japanese traditional tattoos in globalized society

Sociological inquiries often focus on the effect of globalization, suggesting that today's societies contain both elements of modernity and postmodernity. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno (1976) regard the culture of capitalism as a mass culture but not as an indigenous popular culture. Industrialized culture provides not only standardization and pseudo-individualization, but also a rationalization of the promotion and distribution of techniques. For them, the 'culture industry' is an instrument of dominant commercial and administrative systems of capitalism. Baudrillard (1993) emphasizes that the advent of postmodernity may have invalidated even the subject. He holds that the rise of postmodernity has necessitated a complete surrender that leaves a void, with people bereft of hope about increased self-consciousness, freedom and social justice. Bauman (1998, 1999) has noted elements of modernity and postmodernity in the processes of globalization. For him, modernity is a continuous and uncompromising effort to cover up that void, while postmodernity abandons such efforts and denies the beliefs held in the modern mentality (Bauman, 1999). He views society not only as a dynamic process but also as the product of human endeavor and creativity.

Bauman (1998) further discusses the polarized characteristics of globalized society. While integration proceeds in the globalizing society, resistance toward the process is also seen:

Neo-tribal and fundamentalist tendencies, which reflect and articulate the experience of people on the receiving end of globalization, are as much legitimate offspring of globalization as the widely acclaimed 'hybridization' of top culture – the culture at the globalized top. A particular cause for worry is the progressive breakdown in communication between the increasing global and extraterritorial elites and the ever more 'localized' rest. (Bauman, 1998: 3)

In this sense, tattooing as an ancient art presents a good case for examining the characteristics of globalization. That is, the contemporary practice in Japan represents how pre-modern values and practices have been shaped in the transition from modern to postmodern periods.

As many studies of tattooing practices in Western cultures suggest (Atkinson, 2001, 2003; Bell, 1999; Irwin, 2001; Kosut, 2000, 2006; Sanders, 1994; Turner, 1999; Vail, 1999), exploring individual reasons and motivations for being tattooed helps in understanding the nature of contemporary popularity of tattoos. For example, Turner (1999) theorizes the significance

of tattooing practices today and observes changes in the nature of tattoos, which also indicate changes in the nature of the social life-cycle. In traditional society, the meaning of tattoos was social and collective, projecting certain images such as criminality (i.e. danger) and tribal traditions, whereas in contemporary society social linkages are no longer as important. Rather, the purpose of being tattooed becomes more personalized and individualized. Given this perspective, tattoos and other types of body art can be defined as 'the social construction of traditional patterns of sociability in the modern world' (Turner, 1999: 41). Therefore, it is important to understand traditional tattooing in the context of the social processes of production and reproduction. Drawing on Turner's argument, I consider contemporary Japanese tattoos as both a socially constructed product and an indicator through which to observe the impact of globalization.

Since the purpose of tattoos has become more individualistic, rather than social and collective, tattooists are expected to meet their clients' various needs in the consumer culture. Turner (1999: 40) points out an important relation between global consumerism and the contemporary tattoo culture: '[g]lobalization has produced a *mélange* of tattoos which are ironically self-referential and repetitive, and the very hybridity of tattoo genres playfully questions the authenticity of these commercial body marks'. Thus, contemporary tattooing practices are becoming part of the consumer culture and more commercially exploited.

As explained earlier, because of the traditional social stigma of tattooing in Japan, the practice once remained underground. Meanwhile, Japanese traditional designs have been widely reproduced overseas (Bradshaw, 2007; Mansfield, 1999; McCabe, 2005; Okazaki, 2007). Due to the international appreciation of Japanese traditional designs, a number of visitors wish to study and acquire the Japanese style. For instance, Don Ed Hardy, one of the best-known American tattooists, has visited Japan repeatedly to learn traditional Japanese tattooing methods and techniques (Bradshaw, 2007; Gilbert, 2000; Mansfield, 1999; McCabe, 2005; Okazaki, 2007). Besides his own tattoo customers in the United States, Hardy also has a Japanese clientele who appreciate the fusion of Japan and the West, or 'his Western interpretations of traditional Japanese motifs' (Mansfield, 1999: 38). Japanese traditional tattoo designs, ironically, are imported to Japan now in reverse, appearing as the one-point tattoo, which fuels the Japanese youth trend. In this sense, Hardy's interest and respect enhance the authority of Japanese traditional tattoo art and authenticate both its elitism and marginality.

Tattooed bodies may be less negatively perceived or stereotyped than they used to be because the social meanings and relations to which tattoos were attached are becoming weaker and more rationalized. However, it could be said that traditional values, beliefs and practices associated with tattooing may be modified and even lost. A key element is to see whether the tattooing practices provide or reflect authenticity and originality. Thus, when I argued that the marginality of Japanese tattooing is essential to maintain its vitality and a sense

of authenticity, the example of Japanese tattooists' lack of communication at a tattoo convention indicated their commitment to maintaining the traditional values and standards of Japanese tattoo artists.

Nevertheless, the process of appropriating art does not happen by mutual agreement, instead mainstream culture determines whether art becomes mainstream or marginal. 'The mainstream needs to appropriate the marginal ... in order to convince itself of its own validity and legitimacy' (Kuspit, 1991: 134). In other words, mainstream or marginal art is based on what members of the mainstream society treat as art, regardless of the intent of people who revere or preserve their work as marginal art. Although tattooing was often associated with particular groups such as working-class people and outlaws, it has spread to more diverse social and class groups due to the increased mass media attention to tattoo art, and its availability. In a sense, Japanese tattooing practices as a whole are being forced to become the mainstream. Therefore, westernization consequently creates polarized attitudes within the Japanese tattoo subculture as to whether to be mainstream or marginal.

Based on this argument, I consider the traditionalists' attitudes as a sign of cultural resistance against the assimilation process of tattooing into the consumer culture. From postmodernist perspectives, marginality, isolation and strangeness constitute significant elements of resistance and suggest a number of possible reasons for justifying the secretive attitude. For instance, one element of resistance involves the lack of communication among Japanese traditional cohorts, which perhaps shows a sense of serious rivalry and even a mutual sense of keeping their skills and techniques reserved for select clients. In addition, the traditionalists resist the trivialization of their tattoo culture due to the Western influence on Japanese tattooing, because breaking the secrecy of tattooing practices may be regarded as breaking the commitment to the tradition.

Another element '[t]ied up with the idea of marginality as a demonstration of authenticity is the idea of greater-than-ordinary openness to and depth of experience and, correlatively, extraordinary power of Being' (Kuspit, 1991: 137), suggesting that the marginality of Japanese tattoos represents and reflects its vitality and a sense of authenticity. Thus, the international appreciation of the Japanese traditional tattooing style pressures traditionalists to recapitulate Japanese traditional tattoo designs. Because the tattoo tradition has been both threatened and popularized by this global development, choosing to remain in the margins is an inevitable resistance to global consumerism.

Indeed, the traditionalists' secretive, closed attitude at tattoo conventions is contradictory because it spontaneously shows acceptance and rejection. They agree to attend public events because they are invited as honorable guests and the title enhances the authority of Japanese traditional tattoo art. At the same time, the traditional tattooists keep closed and aloof with regard to their rivals because of their pride. Therefore, this closedness or rejection authenticates their elitism and further contributes to the marginality of Japanese tattooing.

Research settings and methods

While this article draws on historical and cross-cultural research, it also incorporates the experiences of three tattooists living in Japan to illuminate some aspects of contemporary Japan. As mentioned earlier, tattoo studios were rarely advertised in Japan, making it difficult to recruit Japanese tattoo masters. I first utilized the Internet and searched articles written in Japanese and English, as well as homepages of tattooists and tattoo studios in Japan. Establishing a rapport with Japanese traditional tattooers was extremely difficult because they do not easily trust someone they have never met. For instance, new clients are usually introduced to the tattooists by word of mouth, because only individuals that the Japanese tattooists trust can be their clients. Fortunately, three tattooists agreed to participate in this study and corresponded with me by letter and email.²

The interviews with three tattooists revealed how they defined themselves as artists, how they distinguished Japanese tattooing from other styles, and how they valued their work as art. Horikazu,³ who lives in Gifu, Japan, had been a traditional tattoo master for over 40 years, and Horimitsu is a tattooist in Osaka, Japan. The names, Horikazu and Horimitsu, were their stage names as professional tattooists, and had been given by their tattoo masters. As proof of completing their apprenticeship, Japanese tattooists usually use those honorific names. Another tattooist, Marcos, was originally from Brazil. Marcos has resided in Japan for seven years and established his tattoo studio in the Kanagawa prefecture. He did not use a stage name given by his master.

Corresponding to their rank as top traditional tattoo masters, these elite tattoo masters are relatively inaccessible for interviews, although there have been some exceptions. While they receive many invitations for magazine interviews and tattoo-related events, from overseas as well as Japan, out of respect for their authority, only rare interviewers who gain the trust of the masters are given an opportunity for interviews. Prior to the interviews, the two traditional tattooists revealed that they had been betrayed by some visitors who took advantage of the information and knowledge acquired from them. As a result, they agreed to be interviewed if I met certain conditions. One of their requests was to communicate with those tattooists only textually, and to use pictures of their artwork only with their written permission. Furthermore, Marcos, the Brazilian tattooist, specifically insisted that he wanted to be interviewed not in the English or Portuguese language but in Japanese.

Clients and motivations for Japanese traditional tattoos

Until about ten years ago, almost 99 percent of the clients that Horikazu and Horimitsu had were members of the *yakuza* or Japanese mafia. After the 1990s, however, the number of the *yakuza* customers declined because of the recession in the Japanese economy and the implementation of the Act for

the Prevention of Unlawful Activities by Boryokudan (syndicate) members (Horikazu). Both Horimitsu and Horikazu reported that now about 50 percent of their customers are ordinary people whose occupations vary. While formerly their clients' were laborers and geishas, now the number of intellectual workers such as artists, office workers, or sometimes the presidents of companies, is increasing (Horimitsu and Horikazu).

Horimitsu has seen many clients who decided to get tattooed to represent their pride, hope and will, most frequently to express grief and eternal love. For instance, a man in his thirties lost his child due to a certain illness. His pain and suffering was not ameliorated by religious involvement, and he became depressed, experiencing feelings of hopelessness. Over time, the man decided to have a tattoo of his child's face on his back. His tattoo appeared to heal his pain ever since. There was another female client who was in her forties and ran a night club. She received the same tattoo as her late husband while he was alive. By being tattooed, she thought she could experience the same pain that he had. She believed that it would relieve his pain and allow her husband's soul to experience more restful peace.

Another reason for being tattooed is to create external motivation to avoid shame. Company presidents and people who are about to run new businesses sometimes visit the traditional tattoo masters. A male client used to run a business, but it went bankrupt. To start a new business, he came for a tattoo. The client said:

Through my tattoo experience, I wanted to prove my strength and bravery. I had such a painful experience of being tattooed. From now on, I feel like I can endure any difficulty and pain that I will face. It will be shameful for my tattoo if I lose confidence again. I feel like I can go through any hardship.

Later, he became the president of a Japanese company.

This type of tattoo is called *kishobori*, or a vow tattoo, and was often seen in the feudal Edo period. According to Horikazu, *kishobori* is a tattoo of a pledge to avoid wrong behavior or decisions, and there were two different meanings of the *kishobori* tattoo. While one type of the *kishobori* tattoo was originally practiced among lovers, geishas and *yujos*, the other refers to pledging their lives to the Buddhist scriptures. Horikazu explained that *kishobori* today is mostly the latter type. For instance, some people have tattoos to make them feel more confident. When they become pessimistic, they look at their tattoos and get encouragement. Others get tattooed to summon good luck or to succeed at business.

One day, Horikazu recalled, a man ran into the tattoo studio. He looked pale. The man said that he was involved in trouble with some other men. Indeed, he had killed one of them. He was on the 'most wanted' list. 'Since then, I have had a nightmare. The man's face that I killed has appeared every night,' the client said. Horikazu carefully considered this situation and finally decided to tattoo him. The design the client chose was *kannon*, the Goddess of Mercy. He was satisfied with the *kannon* tattoo that Horikazu designed. 'Pray. Keep

apologizing and asking him to forgive you while being tattooed,' Horikazu said. Horikazu himself also prayed to Buddha while he offered the tattooing. The client visited the studio to get tattooed every other day. After about a month passed, the kannon tattoo on his back was completed. The client announced that he would turn himself over to the police. 'Since my tattoo was completed, I did not have a nightmare any more. Thank you very much.' Horikazu received a letter from the client in prison saying: 'I was expecting a twelve-year imprisonment for the murder, but was sentenced to eight years. I think the kannon on my back helped me. I thank the kannon so much.'

Japanese traditional tattoos reflect a sense of solidarity within social groups. For instance, there is a tattoo which proves a member worthy of the yakuza. One yakuza boss was tattooed because of his status and pride: 'I cannot bring the Benz into the jail even though I can drive it now. But I can bring my tattoos wherever I go' (quoted by Horimitsu). Furthermore, Horikazu informed me that there were members of non-criminal associations in Tokyo who chose to be tattooed as one aspect of their participation in certain events or festivals, although tattooed participants in events such as hadaka festivals are rarely seen today.

Japanese traditional tattoos as hidden art

Traditional tattooists consider the unity of the design important. In other words, tattoo designs on each body part, the arms, shoulders, back, front and legs are all interconnected. This larger scale of the design requires greater commitment from tattooists and tattooees. For instance, Horikazu strictly preserves a traditional method of tattooing: 'Offering tebori takes more time and money to complete than tattooing by machine. However, I can tattoo by hand much faster than you expect.'

Horikazu thinks that tradition has to be preserved and transferred from generation to generation. He is still dedicated to preserving and replicating his master's teaching:

There are four seasons (spring, summer, fall and winter) in Japan. The seasons should be expressed in tattoo art. Japanese traditional tattoo masters can express each season on the skin. However, untrained tattooists do not know traditional thoughts on Japanese art. For example, the untrained tattooists draw a snake and cherry blossoms, but this is wrong in tradition. When cherry trees begin to bloom in March in Japan, snakes still hibernate under the ground. So the snake and cherry blossoms cannot be seen in the same period. Therefore, it does not make any sense if the snake and cherry blossoms are drawn together.

Thus, there is a consistency in each tattoo design, which has a certain meaning and motive. Tattooing requires skills and techniques, like other art forms such as painting. Horikazu considers Japanese tattoos as traditional art, often

referred to as 'skin art'. While the painter works on canvas, the tattooist works on human skin. Consequently, it is important for the traditional tattooists to establish trust with their clients.

According to Horimitsu, another traditional tattoo master, the term, *horimono*, meaning tattoos in Japanese, is commonly used among traditional tattooists:

Horimono is different from drawings or paintings which are completed only with one's passion. Partnership between a tattooee and a tattooer is important to complete art work. My job is to offer good work to each client. I am completely delighted when I accomplish my goal, especially when my work pleases and satisfies my client.

Because tattoos are permanent marks on the body, being tattooed means 'having indelible marks' or 'hurting the body'. Even though tattoos are technically erasable by a laser surgery, it is impossible to get the original skin back. Because of the permanency, one could experience despair at being permanently stigmatized in Japanese society. However, Horimitsu denied the idea of a tattoo's permanency.

Even though a wonderful design is tattooed on the whole body, it will be burned to ashes if one dies. Tattoos are not permanent. The chances that tattoos are paid attention to are only limited to a life. One's favorite designs or patterns on the living human skin are in the limelight, and this shows ultimate narcissism or heroism in terms of overcoming difficulties such as money, time and pain.

Tattoos, as Horimitsu described, have a limited life as every living object does.

According to the two traditional tattoo masters, tattoos were also considered as a flower in the shade or hidden beauty. Hence, the tattoos were not supposed to be revealed in public. Why do the traditional tattoos have to be hidden? Historical and social meanings are intertwined for the idea of Japanese tattoos as hidden art.

One reason for Japanese tattoos as hidden art can be attributed to their patterns. In addition to the *munawari* pattern that I mentioned earlier, Horikazu introduced another traditional pattern called *jinbeibori*, *jinbei* tattoo. *Jinbei* is an open front style of kimono and is usually worn in summer. Notably, no matter what pattern is chosen by clients, traditional Japanese tattoos are only done on the body location that is covered with a kimono.

Another reason for tattoos as hidden came from social oppression in feudal Japan. As mentioned, the traditional tattoo style was originally developed during the feudal era when tattooing was adopted for criminal punishment. This parallel created the paradox of Japanese tattooing practices. Horikazu remarks:

Tattoos were treated as hidden art among the tattoo-lovers. Because of the ban on tattooing in Japan, however, they had to visit tattoo studios secretly. Even after the ban was lifted, many tattooists still open their studios without putting up signboards. Customers visit us by word of mouth.

Due to the use of punitive tattooing and a series of restrictions and prohibitions on tattooing, it became an underground practice among tattoo enthusiasts. However, a Japanese cultural expression, called *iki* or stylishness, stemmed from that social oppression and resistance. Horimitsu said: 'Tattoos have been considered as a flower in the shade, a hidden beauty, and not supposed to be shown off in public. Because such beauty is rarely seen through public eyes, it is an honor to see it.' Horimitsu's idea originated in the Edo period, when tattooing was in vogue, despite government restrictions.

According to Kuspit (1991: 135), marginal art can be understood as 'injured' art, because it 'conveys the problematic condition of the modern subject, always on the verge of disintegration, and the equally problematic, relativistic character of art in the modern world, a condition that precludes its conclusive conceptualization.' Throughout Japanese history, tattooing has been included and excluded from time to time. During the imperial era, Japan learned new cultural values and concepts from the West. Tattooing practices, including tribal customs, were prohibited because of this influence. Given Kuspit's discussion, it could be argued that imperial Japan was oppressive towards tattooing practices and forced them underground. Ironically, cultural globalization has now made Japanese tattooing more liberated. Contemporary tattooists are eager to learn tattooing techniques from other cultures as well as their home country. However, Japanese traditional tattooists still maintain certain customs, even though Japan's tattoo culture has had a major impact on globalized tattooing styles.

Western-style tattoos

As explained earlier, the Western style of tattooing is becoming popular among young people. According to Horikazu and Horimitsu, the term *wan pointo tatuu* (one-point tattoo), meaning getting only one tattoo, is often used by young Japanese. Tattoo clients often choose Western designs for their tattoos. Japanese entertainers wearing tattoos often perform on TV, impacting the youth culture. Unlike the full body tattoo, the one-point tattoo may be more acceptable as a fashion statement in Japan. Tattoos and body piercing are regarded as the ultimate in fashion, a form of self-expression, and a physical transformation of the body in Japanese youth culture.

How do traditional tattooists see the current trend of tattoos in Japan? Horikazu explained that Japanese attitudes toward tattooing practices changed over time. Tattoo shops with signs are visible in urban cities, and people come in and out without hesitation. It takes 30 minutes or an hour to get tattooed if they find a favorite design. 'I don't honestly like one-point tattooing. I love traditional Japanese samurai pictures and *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Tattooing traditional pictures is my life,' Horikazu says. From his view, obtaining a one-point tattoo is similar to going to a convenience store. Traditional tattooists seem to have mixed feelings about the popularity of one-point tattooing. They think that it is appropriate to draw a line between traditional and contemporary tattoos. Horimitsu remarks:

A decade ago, such a small tattoo, that is, one-point tattoo, was called *tengo* in Osaka dialect, meaning 'mischief,' 'a stain', or 'graffiti'. Adults would regard this act as youthful inexperience. Nowadays, however, we can see many groups of people acting out this 'youthful inexperience' on the street in Osaka.

Therefore, the traditionalists may consider that the popularity of the Western style may trivialize the Japanese tattoo tradition. In contrast to the long history of the Japanese tattooing tradition, the Western style of tattooing is a newcomer, even a fad, which has just appeared over a short time. Although some tattoo enthusiasts even claim that 'traditional significance has ... been diffused and polluted by Western influences' (McCabe, 2005: 11), instead it seems that the Japanese tattoo culture regains its popularity by accepting Western influence.

Contemporary vs traditional

Marcos, a tattooist from Brazil, decided to settle in Japan because of the crisis of Brazil's economy in 1990. More importantly, he was fascinated by the Japanese style and its designs and wanted to learn the method and techniques. 'I had had a dream to come to Japan since my childhood. Now I own my tattoo studio here.' According to Marcos, Brazil was politically and economically unstable when he decided to move, and Japan became one of the most attractive places to live.

To open a tattoo studio in Japan, one is required to have a Prefecture Police License, City License and Hospital Sterilization Certificate. Furthermore, to show his serious intentions, Marcos became an apprentice to a 'family' of tattooists. A 'family' does not mean a blood-family, but an association of a tattoo master and pupils. Perhaps because he is a foreign practitioner in Japan, there was much discouragement and discrimination during the apprenticeship. For instance, under the old Japanese style of apprenticeship, young pupils used to live within their master's houses and were not allowed to learn tattooing and even use tools for the first few years; rather, they were expected to learn basic disciplines, such as cleaning the house and washing dishes. Through the chores, apprentices learned patience as professionals. If those jobs were not properly done, the pupils were scolded and sometimes hit by the master. Marcos explains:

I didn't know about the 'family' when I first began the apprenticeship, but later learned they had the same rules as the *yakuza*. I thought keeping the relationship between the master and pupil was out of fashion. Although I didn't like the traditional ways of apprenticeship, I tried to understand and accept them while I was a pupil.

From Marcos's viewpoint, the apprenticeship that many tattoo masters practiced resembled the system in feudal society. Masters' orders were absolute and

pupils had to obey them. Meanwhile, masters would support their pupils until they became professional persons. Thus, showing commitment is important.

All of the three tattooists, traditional and contemporary, served periods of apprenticeship. Although Horikazu and Horimitsu appreciate the traditional practices of the apprenticeship, Marcos, the young Brazilian tattooist, said it was out of fashion. Horikazu worked as a pupil for five years, enduring his master's violence to acquire his skills. Horimitsu was also trained for several years to become a tattoo master. During his apprenticeship, Horimitsu even cut off one of his fingertips to express his gratitude or loyalty toward his master. Marcos, however, disliked the rules and violence during the apprenticeship. He continues:

I am not Japanese, but I am a tattooist who possesses skills to tattoo Japanese style. I learned both Japanese and Western styles and also received the signboard as a professional tattooist from my tattoo master. But I personally don't like the traditional style because it reminds me of the *yakuza* [mafia] family. So I don't often offer *ukiyo-e* style.

Based on this comment, Marcos seemed to have a strong dislike of the Japanese tradition of apprenticeship. While Marcos did not want to discuss in detail the apprenticeship that he experienced, he mentioned that the family he belonged to was like the *yakuzas*. Therefore, Marcos might have experienced some kind of violence during his training, which made him reluctant to portray Japanese *ukiyo-e* designs although they are often requested by his clients.

About 75 percent of Marcos's customers are Japanese, and 25 percent are non-Japanese. He specializes in tribal-style tattoos, which have been popular, and will provide Japanese traditional style and American tattoo designs upon request. Since Marcos has a command of Japanese, English and Portuguese, he fully satisfies both Japanese and non-Japanese clients. Most of his customers are in their twenties and thirties, and 45 percent are females and 55 percent are males. Their varied occupations include office workers, businessmen, university students, bank clerks and so on. According to Marcos, tattoo trends in contemporary Japan are very similar to those in the West. 'Tattoos used to carry a stigma among Japanese people, but such negative attitudes toward tattooing are not so often seen any more.' He notes that non-Japanese people, especially Americans, tend to be fond of the Japanese style.

Throughout his life in Japan, Marcos, as a contemporary tattooist, has expressed an acceptance of and resistance to Japanese culture. On the one hand, to be a good apprentice, he has learned Japanese and its manners and customs. On the other hand, he refuses to preserve Japanese tattooing traditions and considers them old-fashioned. Particularly, Marcos wanted to resist the feudalistic structure and the exploitive power relationship in his apprenticeship with his tattoo master. Such mafia-like relationships between tattoo masters and pupils, he implies, were created and are now sustained by the secrecy of the Japanese traditional tattoo culture and, thus, are not amenable to sufficient change during his life.

Therefore, unlike the traditional tattooists, Marcos openly displays a signboard and runs a tattoo studio in Japan. Thanks to the advance of computer technologies and information systems, he presents videos and pictures of his work on the Internet and attracts many tattoo clients. In Marcos's case, the globalization effect promotes his business and career. He appreciates local needs (i.e. tattoo clients in Japan) and also seeks more possibilities in a global market.

The Japanese traditional style of tattooing strongly reflects its cultural connection and commitment, including the existing social stigma and cultural marginality. On the one hand, the choice of the Western style gives a sense of liberation for self-expression and individuality without taking any risk of breaking cultural norms. However, it also may be regarded as escape from cultural connection and commitment. Although the global trend of tattoo popularity has expanded personal options, it may have lost authenticity. On the other hand, cultural boundaries and limitations on traditional tattooing may restrict tattoo customers for the traditionalists but secure the authenticity of the original style.

Globalization, westernization and cultural resistance in Japanese tattoo culture

Contemporary tattooing practices in Japan reveal tensions and conflicts associated with the intersection of globalization and localization. The expansion and transformation of capitalism is integral to the global economy. Cultural globalization is the result of the development of mass tourism, increased migration, and the commercialization of cultural products associated with the widespread ideology of consumerism. Consequently, cultural globalization paradoxically creates a threat to the continuity and authenticity of local cultures, and elicits a protest against the homogenization of cultures. Thus, while the traditional tattoo masters somewhat accept and incorporate Western styles into Japanese tattoos, they still guard their sense of authenticity and pass it to the next generation. This cultivated marginality of the Japanese tattoo tradition thereby enhances its sense of authenticity.

This coexistence of Japanese tradition and Western cultures results in cultural hybridity and complexity. For the Japanese traditional tattooists, it is important to preserve their tradition for future tattooists. However, from the contemporary tattooist's view, passing on such traditions as the apprenticeship is considered old-fashioned, although the artistry should be appreciated. For instance, while Horimitsu and Horikazu maintain traditional practices and values, including a 'closed' shop, a contemporary tattooist, Marcos, tends to open his occupation to the public. Japanese traditional tattooists do not necessarily want tattooing to be in the mainstream. Rather, they resist the infusion of Japanese tattoo tradition into the contemporary mainstream culture.

Drawing on Bauman's (1998) argument, I see cultural globalization as the dominant force in mainstream Japanese society today, and it generates polarized attitudes (acceptance and resistance) toward tattooing practices. Tattoos are often used as a means of self-expression, personal identity and source of inspiration. Today, it is often claimed that tattooing is accepted by the mainstream, but Japanese tattoo masters do not appear to believe this to be the case. The existence of social constraint seems important to maintaining their tradition, while they are pleased with the current tattoo popularity as body art. In essence, they seem both to accept and resist the globalizing impact of tattooing practices.

The traditional tattooists, Horimitsu and Horikazu, revealed their resistance, vacillating between Japan's traditional views (secrecy) and Western cultural values (openness). From the young Brazilian tattooist's perspective, alternatively, the Japanese tradition of tattooing provided him with new concepts, which created both confusion and resistance toward the tradition. I would suggest that these tattooists' vacillation reflects the conflicts and contradictions that are the consequences of globalization. Tattooed symbols are now acknowledged as body decoration, body adornment and body art. As Kuspit (1991) explains, because marginal art has come to be important today, tattooing practices have also become more visible and treated as a novelty in the mainstream society. Japan has also experienced this process.

Traditional practices have survived efforts to extinguish them during the pre-modern to modern transition. While tattooists try to retain a vital presence in the modern-to-postmodern transitional period, the traditional practices may be threatened more than ever before because of the commodification associated with the postmodern global economy. Not only are newer forms of tattooing emerging within Japanese culture, but also the traditionalists are finding their techniques being copied by non-Japanese tattooers, reproduced in non-traditional ways, and exported to non-Japanese cultures. While the traditionalists have been able to resist efforts to eliminate their practices and values, they are confronted by a new and much more powerful foe: globalization, with its capitalistic exploitation, commodification of traditions or distinct cultural practices, and profit-seeking.

This foe challenges the tradition of keeping Japanese tattoos from public view and regarding them as hidden beauty. Due to the international appreciation of the traditional style, the Japanese *ukiyo-e* based tattoos have become well known in many countries. And yet, the Japanese traditional tattoo masters still choose to keep their studios without signs. Although the Western style is often requested because of its recent popularity, the Japanese traditional tattooists have continued their hidden practices.

In this article, I have analysed the popular culture of Japanese tattooing as an example of how traditional values, beliefs and practices have been shaped and modified in globalized society. As Japanese tattoos were once known as hidden art, it is inevitable that the traditional tattooists keep the essence of Japanese tattoo tradition. However, a tattooing practice oppressed

during the feudal era is now being forced to be more liberated. In this sense, the traditionalists have experienced a new challenge in globalized society. Bauman argues that postmodern mentality and practice produce the ambivalent human condition:

As it is always the case with the notoriously ambivalent ... human condition, the gains of postmodernity are simultaneously its losses; what gives it its strength and attraction is also the source of its weakness and vulnerability. (1999: 366)

Drawing on this argument, I further suggest that being hidden or marginalized gives Japanese traditional tattooing its strength and vitality. At the same time, the marginality of Japanese tattoos also shows its vulnerability and fragility. As Hosokawa (1999) emphasizes, popular culture holds different meanings in countries where values and conditions differ from, and may even contradict, those of Japan. Therefore, it is important to recognize the polarity and ambivalence within globalized popular culture. Further research needs to explore how the localized process of tattooing, including cultural resistance, will impact local and global consumerism, how contemporary (and future) tattooists and tattooees will define or redefine Japanese tattoo culture, and how Japanese traditional tattooists will preserve or lose their tradition.

Notes

- 1 To explain historical periods, I use Japanese chronology. The major eras are: Edo (1603–1868); Meiji (1868–1912); Taisho (1912–26); Showa (1926–89); and Heisei (1989–present). The term Edo also means the present Tokyo.
- 2 Interviews were conducted in Japanese, between 1998 and 1999. All the data were translated into English by the author.
- 3 All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

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