

**Needling Between Social Skin and Lived Experience: An Ethnographic Study of
Tattooing In Downtown Tokyo**

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刺青（入れ墨）に関しては、その歴史や社会的意味、刑罰やヤクザとの関連、あるいはファッション性、審美性、美容、身体加工技法の問題関心などから研究されたり問題化されてきた。本論文は、東京下町の著名な彫師のもとで人類学的住み込み調査をしながら、「彫り物（当事者は入れ墨よりこの言葉を好む）」を纏った人びとと日々を共にした経験に基づき、これまでの研究ではほとんど扱われてこなかった「彫り物」のある重要な側面について考察したものである。それは、やや抽象的に言えば、「彫り物」の意味論というより存在論的側面であり、「彫り物」自体がそれを纏う人やそれを目撃する人に半ば独立したエージェントとして作用する側面である。しかし本論文はそのような私的経験の場だけでなく、それが下町の祭りの神輿の上という公共の場でいわば意味論と存在論が共謀することで生成される力に着目し、それが下町のアイデンティティを力強く更新していくと論じる。

Some form or other of body decoration and alteration is observed in virtually every culture around the world at some point in time. The meanings of, or reasons for, such practices depend on the specific social and cultural contexts in which they occur; a view informed by a broad understanding of the body, and thus how it is treated, being both culturally and socially constructed. This thesis is concerned with one such treatment of the body – that of tattooing – in one specific social and cultural context – the *shitamachi* – downtown area, in Tokyo. Specifically, this research explores *horimono*, which are the large scale decorative tattooing sometimes referred to as ‘traditional Japanese’ tattoos, and how tattooing is practiced and experienced in today’s *shitamachi*.

In both academic scholarship and dominant public commentary *horimono* are interpreted or ‘read’ through a social and cultural lens that posits them, more often than not, as signs or symbols of group association or disassociation and, furthermore, in notions of identity formation. In the Japanese context, this plays out as *horimono* being seen or ‘read’ as a sign of yakuza membership or a criminal identity. This view presumes a historicised social status which is deeply embedded in contemporary Japanese consciousness and based on two primary factors: firstly, the historical practices of tattooing of criminals for punishment and deliberate ostracisation, and secondly, the more recent yakuza penchant for engaging *horimono* for ostentatious or nefarious purposes. Yet ethnographic fieldwork – residing in

Asakusa for sixteen months (January 2010 to May 2011) along with participation in two festivals held annually in the area, Sanja Matsuri and Torigoe Matsuri, over a seven year period (2006-2010, 2012-2013) – revealed that lived experiences of *horimono* and the process of tattooing may penetrate more than just the surface of the skin.

This thesis is neither a theoretical study of *horimono*, nor a conclusive history. Instead this thesis is an ethnography of ‘lived experiences’ where I explore the multi-faceted ways people, wearers of *horimono*, *horishi* tattooists, as well as non-tattooed others, live with and relate to *horimono*. Specifically, this ethnographic study deals with the following three points: 1) The contemporary situation, or how *horimono* exist and under what conditions tattooing is practiced, in the geographical confines of Tokyo’s *shitamachi* in the present day. Taking as a starting point the historical importance of *shitamachi* in the development and evolution of *horimono*, this part of the investigation is concerned primarily with the fundamentals of tattooing practices: who tattoos or is tattooed and how? 2) The relationships between *horimono* and *shitamachi* as a conceptual construct. I question what role, if any, does *horimono* play in the formation of contemporary *shitamachi* identities? And 3) Lived experiences of *horimono*. By ‘lived experiences’ I refer to the various ways people, wearers of *horimono*, and *horishi*, Japanese tattooists, as well as non-tattooed people experience *horimono*. Pertinent questions asked are how do non-tattooed people related to the tattooed person and *horimono*? How do people with *horimono* experience being a tattooed person? How do they experience their *horimono*?

The thesis begins with an introduction to the background and setting of *shitamachi*, Tokyo. I understand Tokyo’s *shitamachi*, or ‘downtown,’ as both a territorial space and a conceptual construct. A location once central to the city of Edo that has changed through history, edging east to the margins of the modern city of Tokyo. Now this area is a place and space most often seen as representative of ‘traditional’ Japan, with locals maintaining businesses and traditional practices along with old social norms. *Horimono* and tattooing is both historically and contemporaneously related to Tokyo’s *shitamachi* with roots of its contemporary practice found here in the Edo era. And, today there remains a notable concentration of *horishi* practicing in the area.

In Chapter one, the history presented is limited to the period and the area directly related to today’s *horimono*, excluding for example the cases of Okinawa and Ainu. The history of tattooing in Japan is characteristically fragmented and diverse: from customary and punitive practices in antiquity, to later markings of criminals, pledges of devotion, onto a flourishing fixture on the street-scene of Edo, and more recent ostentatious and nefarious displays of

today's yakuza. This mix of both complimenting and conflicting practices has emerged disproportionately towards representations of and associations with criminality, or *horimono* as a means of communication.

Chapter two is an observation of tattooing practices based on fieldwork in Asakusa. Here I discuss the practice and process of tattooing. First, I present the techniques, settings and steps involved. Then I look at the business of tattooing, which is comparable to other *shitamachi* business. This discussion reveals how significant inter-personal relations emerge between the clients and the *horishi* through the physical process of tattooing. The finished product –the *horimono* itself – exists only on the body of the client, the tattooed person. But it also shows who has crafted it, with the relations between *horishi* and *horimono* remaining embedded in the skin.

Chapter Three focuses on one *horishi*, the late Horikazu the First (*shodai*) of Asakusa, and as such presents just one portrait from many possibilities. Yet, Horikazu proves an interesting focus as he embodied in his everyday life as a family man, as well as in his role of a tattooist, the characteristics of the *shitamachi* area in which he resided and worked. Discussion in this chapter further gives rise to an understanding of *horimono* as something other than a static image. Rather, *horimono* brings interpersonal relations that are socially significant.

Chapter Four explores the various forms of lived experiences of *horimono*. First I discuss *horimono* from the point of view of non-tattooed people, and second, I discuss how the tattooed person experiences being tattooed. An examination of lived experiences of *horimono* raises questions about the status of, or the relationships between, the body, self and identity, as well as about conceptualisations of *horimono* itself. Rather than being static *horimono* appear to be a dynamic actors.

Following the micro or personal level exploration of lived experiences of *horimono*, chapter five focuses on how *horimono* itself plays out on a macro or community level, in the public sphere. This chapter explores *horimono* and the tattooed body in the context of two annual festivals – Sanja Matsuri and Torigoe Matsuri – discussing the impact on conceptualisations and the remaking of a collective '*shitamachi* identity.' Focus in this chapter is on how two specific aspects of *horimono*, as a representation and agency, work together in the public sphere. These aspects are discussed in terms of 'boundaries' and notions of 'power.'

Through the course of this ethnography, delving into the three points outlined above, I illustrate how *horimono* are experienced in ways unlike the dominant visual-centric readings

the decorated or ‘inscribed’ body suggest. In particular, when experienced as talismanic, apotropaic and other ‘supernatural’ physical manifestations, *horimono* not only contradict the above noted conventional readings of the tattooed body but also the presumed formations of identity that come hand in hand. Thus, *horimono* and the process of tattooing raise questions about the ontological boundaries of the actors involved. This thesis traces the gamut, from social status to ontological status, of experiences of *horimono*.

I show how historicised understandings of *horimono* significantly influence lived experiences. Yet, to take a symbolic or visual interpretation – one of fixed and bounded entities – is to remove *horimono* from the relations and contexts that define how one experiences their *horimono*. In examining the various lived experiences of persons with *horimono* we can see a more fluid negotiation. This suggests that far from fixing the body and self, *horimono* facilitate, perhaps even necessitate, a constantly changing mediation of bodies and selves via the body whose boundaries are manipulated and transgressed by their *horimono*. I suggest *horimono* can act both on the wearer and through the wearer, as an independent agent. The agency of *horimono* plays out most clearly on the festival stage.

Moreover, in the context of *matsuri*, *Shinto* shrine festivals, *horimono* itself emerges as a dynamic social actor, which is engaged in a complicated clash of negotiations with the other actors: locals, domestic and international visitors, shrine officials, police, *katsugi-te* carriers of the *mikoshi* portable shrine and the *kami* spirit within the *mikoshi*. In this setting *horimono* is not just a personal possession on the back of a participant that is a representation of a historicised criminal past; neither is it the distinguishing mark of a criminal or a lived experience of a single person. Rather, *horimono* become all of these. In this manner, imbued with these multiple conflicting roles, it becomes a powerful agent in its own right, acting on the other participants on multiple divergent levels.