‘Outsiders amongst outsiders’: A cultural criminological perspective on the sub-subcultural world of women in the yakuza underworld

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Abstract: This research explores a lesser-known aspect of the infamous yakuza subculture: the wives. Implementing a triangulation of methods and embracing a cultural criminological perspective, this research aims to discover the roles, influences, and positions of these women in this overly patriarchal criminal society. Traveling across the yakuza pyramid, this research seeks to understand these women’s subjective perceptions regarding their own positions and how they express these perceptions through popular media depictions. This study reveals that unlike Western mafia wives, yakuza wives have remained outside the sphere of criminal activity in this organized crime structure, remaining in the passive emotionally and financially supportive role. This research further explores the ways in which these women have adapted to their set circumstances by creating a parallel shadow subculture, an exclusively female ‘sub-subculture’ within the yakuza itself in which they create a sense of solidarity, pride, and confident identities by adopting and mimicking the yakuza rituals and customs as their own.

Key words: yakuza; women; popular media; subculture; cultural criminology

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

“Even a yakuza has a household, a wife and children.”

(Ieda, 2007; 12)

The Japanese yakuza is internationally acclaimed. With a membership of approximately 80,000 men, greater than any of its international ‘brother’ organizations, the names of the largest three syndicates – the Yamaguchi-gumi, the Sumiyoshi-kai, and the Inagawa-kai – have become known worldwide. Countless studies, both in Japan and abroad, have been conducted and published on this extensive organized crime structure. Its history has been traced back hundreds of years. Both the law enforcement and the general public have known the location of each syndicate’s headquarters and their geographical spread for the past decades. The membership figures and details for each syndicate and smaller sub-groups are registered and published by the National Police Agency (NPA) annually, open for everyone to see. Almost every single citizen in Japan is knowledgeable on the yakuza’s activities and whereabouts. Many even confess to knowing a yakuza member through acquaintances and most are aware of which major companies act as ‘front companies’ for the yakuza. Some can even point out which buildings are yakuza-owned. Despite being a criminal entity, it would appear that little is in the dark when it comes to the yakuza. The high level of transparency of this organized crime institution shocks many Westerners, a transparency incomparable to any of the yakuza’s international counterparts who prefer to thrive in the shadows of society.

One area of the yakuza institution however still remains mostly clouded in mystery: their family life. It is no surprising secret that yakuza members – indeed, any man engaged in criminality – has a family on the side. Yet these family members have hardly ever been the subjects of research, remaining in the shadows and out of the bright light of academia. As traditional research will show, the wives of criminal men were long believed to be estranged from their husband’s illegal pursuits and activities. The wife was traditionally portrayed as a dutiful, submissive, and obedient woman, blissfully ignorant of her husband’s criminal career (or consciously choosing to turn a blind eye), a woman whose domain was the home with the children like all other ‘good’ housewives. This view of the passive, moral woman was very much in line with the dominant view of criminality being an overwhelmingly male-dominated phenomenon – women were just not cut out to be criminals, even if their husbands and sons were. If any previous research had shown female activities in gangs or organized crime structures, they simply “ignored [the] girls’ occasionally violent behavior” (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996; 463).
Many researchers in recent years have taken on the task of debunking this stereotype and indeed have successfully done so. Today, research reveals that the women in many international organized crime institutions, notably the Italian mafia, are as involved as their criminal men. Mafia members themselves as well as the police, the criminal justice system, and state officials have taken steps forward in acknowledging the role and influence of mafia wives on not only their criminal husbands but also within the mafia structure itself. Women are no longer assumed to be passive bystanders but are seen as active participants. However, the same cannot be said for research specifically regarding the case of Japan. Studies conducted in this field are surprisingly lacking, and even today little is known about yakuza wives. Are yakuza wives actively involved in the syndicate’s criminal affairs? Do yakuza wives exert any direct influence within the syndicate of their husbands? Few can answer such questions with confidence, and even less can do so with the support of empirical evidence. This research will aim to build a bridge in this gap of knowledge. This research aims to discover whether yakuza wives are as ruthless and involved as other mafia women across the globe have been proven to be.

There has been a boom in the study of women in organized crime and other mafia-like organizations in recent years, significantly on the Italian mafia. As mentioned above, these publications aim to challenge the notion that women are inactive, passive members in the mafia world (Longrigg, 1998; Fiandaca, 2010; Siegel, 2013). These studies bring forth the eye-opening reality that in today’s criminal society women “occupy important positions in crime economies and in organizational structures” (Siegel, 2013; 5). From knowing very little about these mafia women just a few years ago, criminologists have advanced significantly in their knowledge of these mafia wives, mistresses, and mothers.

Yet despite these advancements in the field of women in organized crime, specific studies conducted on women in the Japanese yakuza are extremely limited. In the growing academic field of mafia women the case of Japan is still sorely understudied, and major differences in the particular cultural context that must be specifically addressed accordingly to accurately study the wives of Japanese yakuza members. By shedding light on these factors, the question of mafia women in Japan can finally be compared to the studies conducted on mafia women in other organized crime structures.

In narrowing down the focus of this research, there were some important factors to consider. First, that the aim of this research is twofold, which must be made clear in the research question. There is to start with the **descriptive** element: what are the roles and influences of the wives of yakuza members in this criminal subculture? The descriptive element is the essential starting point due to the very fact that previous research in this chosen topic is limited. The second element that must be made clear in the research question is the **explanatory** aspect of this research, where cause-and-effect relations will be explored. With these considerations in mind, the main research question for this research has been formulated as the following:

*What are the roles of yakuza wives in the yakuza subculture, and how do these women perceive their own positions?*

From this research question it is clear that there is both a descriptive element as well as an explanatory element to the structure of this research.

As mentioned above, the aim here is twofold – to be both descriptive and explanatory. Creating a research design that accommodates these two goals was vital. The research conducted took on a largely **theoretical** approach (as opposed to a policy-related or intervention-based approach), as well as a **flexible** research design. Three main methods decided upon to gather the data, allowing for not only an exploration of subjective experiences but also a triangulation of the data to check for accuracy and comparison; these methods were a **secondary analysis** of prior research, **semi-structured, flexible interviews**, and a **narrative** and **syntagmatic analysis** of media depictions (autobiographical and biographical works and films).
CHAPTER II: Gokutsuma

“‘What kind of woman marries a yakuza?’ I often get asked these kinds of questions. Every time, I answer: ‘Anyone.’ Many of these women have said to me, ‘It just so happened that the person I fell in love with turned out to be a yakuza.’”

(Ieda, 2007; 155)

i. Romantic Encounters

The number of academic research conducted on how these women meet men from the yakuza underworld are close to none. As encountering and marrying a yakuza member in itself is not against the law, the police have no reason to prioritize or finance such research or gather statistics in this field (Resp. 1). Therefore most of the knowledge needed must be taken from autobiographical and biographical accounts and anecdotes from those familiar with or have encountered the yakuza society.

Accounts and opinions on this matter seem to split. Some believe that there is a clear, consistent pattern and notable similarities on how these women meet their yakuza husbands, and thus there exist similarities in their backgrounds and personality traits as well. In the case of adolescent girls, some of the respondents have noted that these girls are often juveniles themselves, having come from troubled homes or disadvantaged backgrounds. This standpoint is can be seen from this excerpt from Respondent 1, a criminology professor and former researcher for the NRIPS:

“A very common pattern is that juvenile girls often go to hang out in town […] and they meet other juveniles or yakuza members and they have a great time. Juvenile girls often come from stressful home situations, or have issues with their parents, and when they meet yakuza members who also have experienced similar issues, these girls feel a strong sense of connection and feel understood by these men. […] Sometimes these girls know that these men belong to the yakuza; sometimes they don’t. But for these girls being a yakuza isn’t necessarily bad, because they start to think ‘Oh, but he’s so cool.’”

(Resp. 1)

Another respondent, a daughter of a yakuza boss herself, also emphasized this point, saying that many yakuza wives used to be delinquents or yanki (a Japanese slang word for delinquents or troublemakers) in their youths as they didn’t grow up in warm or stable home environments (Resp. 9). Another one of my respondents familiar with the yakuza underworld (who wishes to stay anonymous) clearly outlined two main patterns as to how the yakuza meet their wives:

“Firstly, the women work in the mizushoubai industry, or the entertainment and ‘nightlife’ industry. They may work in bars, late-night restaurants or as hostesses. The men often show off their wealth to impress these women. […] This pattern usually is the case for higher-ranking members or the bosses, who have the money to spend.

The second pattern is where the woman and yakuza member have known each other since their youth or adolescence and have grown as juveniles together. They may have been members of bosozoku gangs [juvenile biker gangs] and naturally form a relationship, where the boy eventually becomes a member of a yakuza group.”

(Resp. 4)

In all of these accounts, the respondents appear to stress the fact that these women were once juveniles themselves, thus explaining how they are able to meet such men: through association. These accounts also stress that these women have also come from disadvantaged backgrounds, forming a common ground with the yakuza. It is commonly believed that “underworld women have the same social origins as the men” (Otomo in Fiandaca, 2010; 214). This concept of women from disadvantaged backgrounds being attracted to criminal men has been documented by researchers elsewhere. Several studies of well-known gangster wives and mistresses have shown that such women are often born into a state of poverty and are initially attracted to their criminal spouses due to the economic opportunities they could provide them for a more prosperous life; the initial appeal therefore is largely based in the glamour and wealth of the criminal career (van San, 2011).
The emphasis of the conclusions of such studies on economic prosperity and wealth as key explanatory factors remind us of social-structural theories such as Merton’s Strain or Anomie theory (Bursik, 1988; McLaughlin, Muncie & Hughes, 2003) where the desire to step out of economic deprivation is one of the sole motivations of action for criminals. As we will see later on, however, this pattern does not fit so precisely in the case of Japanese yakuza wives.

Thus the idea of women who marry into the yakuza subculture being slightly different from the average female citizen who comes from a ‘good’, middle-income home appears to be a prevalent one amongst the Japanese. It is perhaps an extension of the traditionally dominant and classic criminological beliefs that criminality is a phenomenon of the lower classes or the ‘underclass’, the theory of social exclusion and Becker’s creation of ‘outsiders’, and shows clear signs of positivist criminological thinking. It hints to John Galbraith’s “culture of contentment”, a culture of the societal majority “who are all right thank you, doing fine and sharing little in common or concern for the excluded minority” (Young, 2003; 393). It is possible to think that these beliefs are popular with the Japanese mainstream society as it allows them to distance themselves further from this criminal underworld, where even their wives are not from the ordinary strata of the community. It bodes well with the mainstream society to create the societal underclass that is the yakuza society as “the Other”, a group “with defective norms who contrast with the normal majority” (ibid; 395). And it appears that the wives too have been conveniently placed in the group of “the Other” as it allows for the further separation between the criminal and non-criminal, even amongst the women.

In the latter of the two accounts above, Respondent 4 further comments on how such women have often worked in the mizushoubai or late-night districts, areas teeming with yakuza members and yakuza-related activities. This too appears to be a common belief and stereotype. However many who are familiar with or are immersed in the yakuza subculture refute this image to be inaccurate – anyone from any class of society has an equal likelihood of meeting and marrying a yakuza member and claim it is inaccurate to say some are more ‘prone’ than others due to their backgrounds or careers. It is also not necessarily the case that women from lower-income classes are more likely to find appeal in such men. In her autobiographical work The Surprising Yakuza World as Seen by the Ane-san the author Misao Tsubaki, a former yakuza wife herself, addresses this common belief regarding yakuza wives and disproves it as inaccurate:

“Of the yakuza wives I know, there is… the daughter of a print shop owner, an esthetician from a salon, a girl from the countryside, a nurse, etc. … […] And there indeed were some wives who used to work in the mizushoubai industry. But it’s not like the movies; it’s not like most of the women are from that area. On the contrary, I actually think that those cases are less common….”

(Tsubaki, 2004; 135-136)

Taking on a different yet interesting view on this discussion, another respondent – an author born into a yakuza household and thus extremely familiar with this world – argues against not only this stereotype but also against generalizing ‘yakuza wives’ as one homogenous group. He argues against treating those in the yakuza society as a separate entity simply based on the fact that they are a criminal subculture. To illustrate this, he provides an excellent example:

“Since the yakuza world is heavily populated by men, it is usually difficult for them to meet women. […] But this isn’t a special case just found with the yakuza; it’s common for all male-dominated institutions. The self-defense force or the police force is the same. […] Some people say that yakuza members often marry women they meet in the nightlife industries but it’s the same for these other institutions. Actually, from what I’ve heard, in a certain downtown area of Tokyo the rate of marriages with a woman from the mizushoubai industry is higher for the police department than for the yakuza. […] My main point being that there is, like with any case, an infinite variety of how a yakuza meets his wife. There’s no way you can compartmentalize it into different patterns, saying ‘Because he is a yakuza member, it is always like this’. That’s what I believe.”

(Resp. 7)

Therefore we can conclude from these accounts from various sources that although there appears to be a widespread belief that women who were once juveniles themselves or women working in the nightlife and entertainment industries may be more inclined to meet, be attracted to, and eventually marry a yakuza member, this is not an accurate depiction of reality. Research has shown that these women could very well come from
upper-class as well as lower-class families and from almost any profession, thus making the promise and lure of economic prosperity an invalid reason for association. Overall it has proven to be near impossible to place these yakuza wives into clear-cut patterns regarding their backgrounds and initial yakuza encounters. These accounts dispute the theory of social exclusion, showing that the boundaries between the socially included and excluded may actually be more porous than those in the mainstream society would like to believe.

ii. Role and Influence

Previous research conducted in the field of women in organized crime have revealed that unlike the traditional view of women being ignorant homemakers and dutiful wives and mothers who are unaware of their husbands’ criminal activities, many of these women have in fact played a small yet very significant role of their respective mafias, serving as messengers and negotiators or being the mastermind behind revenge attacks (Siegel, 2013), and merely a historical lack of research has kept this reality in the shadows (Fiandaca, 2010; Longrigg, 1998; van San, 2011; Siegel, 2013).

As previously mentioned, there has generally been a lack of empirical research into whether women are actively involved in yakuza affairs. However, through the course of this research I believe it is safe to conclude that generally women who have married into the yakuza subculture overall defy these mainstream findings as unlike their international counterparts they have little to no influence or role within the syndicate itself. Instead they generally stay in the ‘traditional’ role of supporting their husbands from the side and raising the children. Almost all respondents echoed this conclusion. Some were more adamant and clear in emphasizing that the women literally had no relation whatsoever to the yakuza syndicate itself:

“The wives have little to no function within the group itself. This is because they are prohibited from becoming formal members of the group.”

(Resp. 4)

However these wives may be ‘used’ by their husbands – for example, it is a common occurrence for yakuza members to conduct bank transfers or sign contracts and leases in the name of their wives rather than their own (Ieda, 2007). Yet this does not make the wife an active participant in the yakuza activities as this is often done purely on the initiative of the husband, the wife’s name merely ‘used’ to avoid police suspicion. This is a common practice in other organized crime structures, where the women would be used for any registration process as a means of avoiding traceable assets to the mafia itself (Longrigg in Fiandaca, 2010). Most respondents on the other hand did acknowledge that these wives did not have a direct role within the group itself, yet they do play a more covert role in supporting their husbands; while their husbands “carry out the activities in plain sight, […] the women support the men from behind” (Resp. 1). But by the word ‘support’, most respondents simply stated that they mean emotional support as opposed to active support. It is still not entirely clear whether all these women happily adopt these supportive roles on their own or are involuntarily put into this position by their husbands as a result of being prohibited from being more active participants, although an interesting discovery is that according to the data, the women themselves seem to have accepted this role, unwillingly or otherwise. As one of my respondents clearly stated:

“It is a world for and by men. I don’t think women are able to really step into it. […] I don’t think it will not be a world for men. I think in terms of the faithfulness and loyalty these men have, it’s just not possible for women to be a part of that world.”

(Resp. 9)

Perhaps unlike their Western counterparts, most women seem to have accepted their traditional role as opposed to feeling the need to ‘emancipate’ themselves by entering a career of overt criminality themselves. Or as we will explore further below, these women may have taken on a different and more unique way of exerting themselves within the subculture that is the yakuza society.

However, one common occurrence that appears to be unique to the Japanese yakuza underworld is that in most cases, these women are also the main (or in some cases the only) source of financial support for the couple or for the family. With the tightening legal severity around the yakuza society since the establishment of
the Botaiho two decades ago, modern-day yakuza members have been struggling with generating an income. Thus it is extremely common for the wife to take on a job to support her husband financially – and this is an openly known fact. These wives have been described as “the backbone of their men’s life financially” (Resp. 1) and the “sole source of money” and the “moneymaking tool” for their husbands (Resp. 3). There are times when the wife takes on this role voluntarily and times when the wife is pressured by her husband to do so; there is no one-fits-all pattern. There does appear to be a pattern however in where and what kinds of jobs these wives take on to support their yakuza husbands: the nightlife and entertainment industry.

“There are a lot of cases where the wife earns money to support her husband by working in the amusement and entertainment industries, like bars or cabarets.”

(Resp.1)

Most of these wives do not engage in criminal activities themselves to fund their husbands, though there have apparently been some reported cases where the wife engaged in drug sales or prostitution (Resp. 4). Some wives may also engage in other forms of illegal activities, such as “bookmaking, loan-sharking, traffic in amphetamines, and illegal gambling” (Otomo in Fiandaca, 2010; 213). This lack of economic success of the yakuza member further refutes the argument in the earlier sub-section regarding the promise of economic prosperity as a source of attraction for these women. But of course, we cannot generalize this pattern to the entire yakuza hierarchal structure; the higher-ranking members and the oyabun himself are known to receive an obligatory ‘membership fee’ from the lower-ranking members on a monthly basis (an NPA White Paper report in 1993 published that a larger yakuza syndicate’s oyabun would receive 527,000 yen (approximately 4050 Euros today) per month just from such fees), meaning they are often not troubled financially (Einstein & Amir, 1999; 143). This means, as we will see below, the case of the oyabun’s wife is extremely different from the women discussed here.

From all the data presented above, we can therefore conclude that in the case of the Japanese yakuza subculture the women do not fit in line with the leading international discoveries on mafia women. While globally women have stepped out of their assumed passive roles and have come forth to openly act on behalf of the mafia, Japanese yakuza wives by contrast stay in the shadows, playing the traditional role of merely supporting their criminal husbands. A unique aspect of yakuza wives however is that they are heavily depended upon by their yakuza husbands to provide financial support for himself as well as their family. Though this does not make these women active participants in the yakuza syndicates, it does make clear that they do indeed have a significant role on the side in supporting their criminal spouses in more tangible ways. However the portrayal of the yakuza wife presented in this chapter is mainly applicable for the lower ranking yakuza wives and the story is entirely different for the wife seated at the very top of the yakuza pyramid – the wife of the oyabun, the ane-san.

CHAPTER III: The Ane-san

i. Lifestyle

As with any organized crime group, those at the top are often believed to be the most successful, the most wealthy, the most glamorous. The same can be said for the yakuza underworld. While researchers have proven that most other organized crime structures such as the Italian and the Russian mafias have evolved from their traditional hierarchal structures to more network-oriented structures, most Japanese syndicates have remained faithful to their rigid hierarchies (the main exception to this rule being the Tokyo-based Sumiyoshikai, which has adopted a federation-based structure) (Hill, 2003). Regardless, in all yakuza syndicates and groups there are clearly the men who sit at the top, and their wives are often the epitome of glamor. As one of my respondents stated, “I think the wife has it tough. Without a doubt. […] Only the women at the top, the ane-sans, have it somewhat easier. Only those at the very top.” (Resp. 3)

In Japanese literature there are numerous publications and autobiographies on the lives of ane-sans, apparently a popular literary read (Anzai, 2001; Ieda, 2007; Ishihara, 2010; Tsubaki, 2004). These autobiographies all tell stories of the day-to-day life of an ane-san in the modern age. These women live the high life; they drive expensive cars or have chauffeurs. They have bodyguards protecting them during all hours of
the day. They live in spacious, lavish mansions though granted, often communally with the subordinates of her husband’s syndicate. Their husbands shower them with expensive clothes, bags, and jewelry. They often admit to having a drinking problem. Their grand lifestyle is incomparable to the wives in the lower ranks struggling daily to make ends meet. The stereotypical image of the wealthy and glamorous gangster wife (Longrigg, 1998) is evidently applicable for these high-ranking Japanese mafia wives as well. And consequently, due to their higher-ranking status and incredibly different lifestyle results in these women having very different roles and influences compared to the women described above.

ii. Role and Influence

The *ane-san* at the top of the hierarchy has several important roles to fulfill. First, as the ‘mother figure’ of the group her husband rules, not only must she tend to the daily necessities of the subordinates but also to those of their wives. As these smaller sub-groups often all live communally in the *oyabun*’s home, a direct reflection of the traditional collectivist nature of many Asian cultures, she must provide the meals for all members of the group and tend to all the household chores. Therefore, for obvious reasons, the finances of the group often fall into the responsibility of the *ane-san*. As former *ane-san* Chizue Anzai writes in her autobiography, “To feed the other girls and subordinates, I spent every day running around, managing the money” (Anzai, 2001; 62). The practice of the women holding the household finances is not unique to the yakuza underworld but is a practice widespread across the Japanese society as a whole. Women often have the status as head of the family regarding financial matters, as the men would come home and hand over their earnings to their wives, giving the women a sense of economic autonomy and dominance in everyday affairs unfound in Western cultures (Kersten, 1996; 390).

These top wives are also often the ones who come to resolve any quarrels between the group’s subordinates or between the subordinates and their wives; where the *oyabun*, too far removed from the interpersonal relationships of his subordinate members falls short, his wife steps in as the advisor and mediator for such conflicts. This notion was supported by many of my respondents. Respondent 9, a daughter of a yakuza boss states: “If you’re the *ane-san* of a group, you also have the very important role of taking care of the subordinates and providing them with emotional support and giving them advice”.

Finally, it is the *ane-san*’s responsibility to be resilient against police inquisitions to protect her husband and the group as a whole. Due to her financial responsibilities, though she is not an active participant herself the *ane-san* is often very knowledgeable on the activities and inner workings of the syndicate, and this is well known by the police.

“The boss’s wife is the most knowledgeable on the group’s flow of money: how much everyone earns, how many subordinates there are... she probably knows more than the boss himself. If you investigate the yakuza group’s financials, it’s common that the police will come across the wife’s name on their bank accounts, for example. So if they want to go after the money, they’ll probably start with the wife.”

(Resp. 7)

Because of this, the retired *marubo* police officers I had the opportunity to interview all agreed that the *ane-san* learns to become resilient and obstinate against the police.

“... Well, they usually have a solid sense of pride, are pretty strong-willed and hard-mouthed. [Laughs] You could never beat them in a verbal fight. And I guess this has to do with the fact that they’re husbands are those kind of people, but there is probably an aspect of honor there as well.”

(Resp. 6)

The son of a yakuza boss also commended these women on their resilience in protecting their husbands, saying that for many of these *oyabuns* his wife is the “most reliable figure in his life” and in his experience often more resilient than her own husband, who is usually much quicker to start talking (Resp. 7). Former *ane-san* Maiko Ishihara herself echoed this sentiment in her autobiography:

“It’s not that we’re strong-willed from the beginning. In the beginning, everyone dutifully and demurely do as they’re told. [...] But as a yakuza wife, you just can’t stay submissive. The number of subordinates
It is not difficult to see that perhaps there is also a sense of maternal instinct in the need to protect her husband’s subordinates, whom she cares for as the mother of the group. In many of these ane-sans’ autobiographies, such feelings have been explicitly explained as they express a motherly need to care for the wellbeing of the subordinate members as if they were her own children (Anzai, 2001; Ishihara, 2010; Tsubaki, 2004).

For these reasons the ane-san is able to exert some influence over the group – though how much influence exactly she exerts is contested and most likely differs greatly across different groups based on the individual ane-san’s own personality as well. However these women’s perceptions of their own importance within their husbands’ groups may possibly be inflated, affecting the way in which we must look at and analyze their autobiographies. However all respondents agreed that compared to the lower-ranking wives, the ane-san definitely is able to exert more influence over her husband and over her husband’s syndicate, though not to a decision-making level. While the ane-san too is unable to attend formal yakuza events or conferences, she may have the possibility of exerting a ‘considerable’ amount of influence over her husband to voice her own personal opinion (Resp. 4). Again, however, this standpoint is heavily contested.

Unlike the lower-ranking gokutsuma described in the previous chapter, these top wives are not in a situation of financial instability that requires them to provide financial support for the family. Yet it appears that many take on a side job voluntarily. Former ane-san and self-described onna-oyabun Emiko Hamano portrays the difference between wives of different ranks regarding their chosen lines of work:

“Most of the companions of the yakuza [...] earned their living as prostitute masseuses or strippers to support their lovers. When their men went up a level in the gang, and they had themselves called Anesan [big sister], they began to earn money in the rackets' or loan-sharking.”

(Otomo in Fiandaca, 2010; 214)

Once again the importance of hierarchy is heavily emphasized in this excerpt. The distinction between the ordinary gokutsuma and the ane-san is made evident in the side job they take on and whether it is out of necessity or purely on a voluntary basis.

**Chapter IV: The ‘Sub-subculture’ of Women**

i. **The Silver-Screen Ane-san**

Though they have significantly dwindled in recent years, yakuza films were at one point in time highly popular with the Japanese audience. Yet in the traditional yakuza film plotline, the protagonist is an honorable male yakuza, and women are hardly given the limelight; the characters of importance are all men, and should a woman appear she is merely collateral damage, a victim to the yakuza conflicts and violence. As these movies are made to “[reinforce] the virtue of absolute duty towards one’s gang, and, more generally, towards the yakuza code” (ibid; 109) it is easy to see why women do not hold any significant roles. With a male-dominated yakuza world pushing for pro-yakuza films in a male-dominated film industry, this result is hardly surprising.

To compete with these male-dominated films, two noteworthy female-dominated movie series emerged in the cinematic scene in Japan yet the more significant of the two for this research is the Gokudo no Onna-tachi (The Yakuza Wives) series. The movie series began in 1986 and the most recent installation, Gokudo no Onna-tachi: Neo (The Yakuza Wives: Neo) was released June of this year (2013), meaning the series has now been lasting for nearly three decades. Based on Shoko Ieda’s non-fiction reportage series of the same name (though naturally the film plotlines are ‘exaggerated’ for the dramatic appeal), each film follows one female protagonist, often an ane-san or another high-ranking wife as she faces some sort of conflict that is eventually solved by the film’s end. These conflicts are often both a personal one relating to the ane-san’s husband or

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1 Racketeering is still considered an activity in the ‘gray area’ in terms of the law (Otomo in Fiandaca, 2010) and cannot be strictly classified as an illegal activity.
family, and one relating to her yakuza syndicate, a power struggle or collusion and betrayal. The portrayals of the female lead in these movies are without fail all the same, establishing a clear pattern. The ane-san is a force to be reckoned with; steely and cold yet with a humanistic side, she is a proud woman who clearly demonstrates her position of superiority over the other characters in the film, often throwing out phrases such as “Do you have any idea who I am?!” She is cutthroat, often herself wielding a gun or a katana (a traditional Japanese sword) and is never afraid to kill for the sake of honor or revenge – and indeed, she often does so. She is an honorable woman, usually more so than her male counterparts. Those who follow the same yakuza code as her, male or female, respect her greatly. She is often described by others as a “good wife” due to her commitment to the yakuza syndicate and in several films is called an onna-oyabun by yakuza members and civilians alike.

Within these films the woman’s place in the yakuza underworld is paramount. These women are not only knowledgeable on the yakuza rituals and ceremonies but are active participants; several films depict the ane-san or other wives performing the yubitsume ritual as well as engaging in the sakazuki ceremony that binds yakuza members as family, a ritual in reality prohibited to women. They are present at yakuza meetings and conferences, voicing their opinions and forming allegiances. By viewing these films, the audience is likely to believe that women have a central role in the yakuza underworld. But as we will see, it is important to identify the point of view from which these films were made to understand why these characters are portrayed the way they are.

ii. By women, for women: Perceptions

Le Monde journalist Ryu Otomo has noted, “the image of the “lady gangster” spread by some Japanese films, in no way reflects reality” (Otomo in Fiandaca, 2010; 205). And indeed most of the autobiographical accounts by real-life ane-sans will show that their daily lives are not as dramatic or ‘exciting’ as that portrayed in the movies, as gun shootouts and the cutting and stabbing of various body parts so abundant in these films are in fact entirely non-existent. It is essential to acknowledge at this point the importance of identifying this discrepancy, as cultural criminologists point out the necessity of acknowledging “today’s porous boundaries between fiction and non-fiction” or rather the idea of ‘true fiction’, which is defined as “various non-fictional accounts woven into a larger, fictionalized narrative” (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008; 206). Observing the silver screen depictions of these yakuza wives whilst keeping in mind the concept of ‘true fiction’ is the vital starting point in conducting the film analyses.

Most respondents participating in this research had similar opinions on the series in general and questioned its accuracy in reflecting the reality of the yakuza subculture. Many clearly emphasized the point that a female author, Shoko Ieda, had written the reportage that served as the basis of the films, which is focused almost entirely on women. Thus it is very easy to imagine that the perception of importance of these ane-sans have been exaggerated by the subjects themselves and this exaggeration was at the same time readily accepted by the author whom herself is a woman. The stories that are told in these movies in the end are “just in the world of films and television” (Resp. 2).

“Yes, this you see, it’s all interviews conducted by a woman from a woman’s point of view, with female subjects, looking at how these women view their situation and their husbands... and their husband’s syndicates. Right. This, this is all from a woman’s point of view...”

(Resp. 5)

“I mean, I do get the impression that [the husbands] are quite dependent on their wives since there are many stories about ane-sans. But I feel like the stories in the movies are a bit exaggerated... if these wives really were going around killing people, I think there would be more arrests and police cases to prove it. [...] If you look at it that way, I think that area is definitely fictional.”

(Resp. 1)

Indeed, yakuza-related arrests of women are generally extremely low. A study shows that between January and October of 1999, there were just 20 women within the 302 cases of yakuza-related arrests and eventually convicted, a mere 6.6% of the total (Otomo in Fiandaca, 2010). Though this research is not very recent, the consequent NPA annual White Paper reports have not reported a significant rise in female yakuza-related
arrests.

Believing that they could give me the most accurate and realistic answers to my questions regarding this movie series, I asked both the son and daughter of the yakuza bosses their opinions on the accuracy of these films. Both strongly emphasized that in reality the *ane-sans* they are familiar with (their mothers) were nothing like these characters. According to Respondent 7, these characters are a much more extreme and exaggerated version of real-life *ane-sans*; his mother he explained “was very humble. Her clothes were more ragged than the wives of her subordinates. She ate what everyone else ate, sometimes just taking the leftovers for herself” (Resp. 7). As Respondent 9 herself is a former *gokutsuma*, I asked whether she felt a connection to these women having been a yakuza wife herself. She clearly stated that these were merely fictional stories made for the movies, and though she had been a yakuza wife herself she had “never helped out with any of their affairs” (Resp. 9). Overall it can therefore be concluded that most viewers of these films find them to be generally inaccurate.

This is an important point to keep in mind when exploring the autobiographical accounts of real-life *ane-sans*, which are technically written to be non-fictional narratives. The autobiographies definitely allude to or plainly state the respective *ane-sans*’ feelings of importance and respect amongst their husband’s subordinates:

“We don’t clearly flaunt ourselves in the public, but we as yakuza wives do have a proper role to play."

“For the subordinates, what the ane-san says is absolute.”

(ISHIHARA, 2010; 45; 128)

“For the subordinates, my words as the ane-san had the exact same power as Sentarou, [her husband].”

(ANZAI, 2001; 109)

“Women are strange. No matter how much pain they suffer or hard times they go through, once they think ‘But he needs me. He can’t do anything without me’, then they’ll stick to him anyway.”

(LED, 2007; 274-275)

Judging by these excerpts it would appear that the *ane-san* of a syndicate most definitely holds a position of authority, power, and respect within her husband’s syndicate, almost as if his subordinates were her own. As some of the *ane-sans* above explicitly state, their word is equal to that of their husbands; she is as much in power as the *oyabun* himself, and this portrayal is definitely supported in the *Gokudo no Onna-tachi* movie series. The question as to whether this position of the *ane-san* is accurate or not is only secondary to the point that these women *themselves* truly believe that they hold this position within their husbands’ syndicates and it is this perception that is of primary importance when analyzing the literature.

### iii. Outsiders amongst Outsiders: the ‘Sub-subculture’

These women live their daily lives in the yakuza subculture and yet are not actual members of the subculture itself. And though they are not criminals, due to their position of living in a criminal underworld they are unable to freely move between the criminal society and mainstream society; one could say they are in effect ‘stuck’ in their positions. It is clear that the marginalization these yakuza wives face, or indeed, any form of female discrimination in the general society, is “always defined in opposition to a system of male power” (Dino in Fiandaca, 2010; 72) – and this system of male power is especially heightened in the mafia subculture. While we cannot attribute every single one of these women’s actions to gendered explanations, at the same time we cannot dismiss or ignore their position as the marginalized gender in a male-dominated society. With these points in mind these women are, one could say, outsiders within the society of criminal outsiders.

It is evident that the men of the yakuza underworld push their wives into a peripheral role despite the women’s own accounts that seem to state otherwise. Though they play a role in supporting their husbands financially, providing emotional support, and raising their children (and caring for the subordinate members if the she is an *ane-san*), they are barred from being active participants or formal members. As described so fittingly by cultural criminologists, these women live their daily lives in the yakuza subculture where “certainties of just reward and confident identity fade away” (FERRELL, HAYWARD & YOUNG, 2008; 56), struggling with their limited positions in a modern world of ‘hyper-individualism’. They are acting as “agents of social
reality, active interpreters of their own lives” (ibid; 88), attempting to “[seize] control of one’s destiny” (Hayward, 2002; 4), making sense of the circumstances “not of their own making” (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008; 65).

The main point to be presented and argued is that the actions of these women – in forming an exaggerated sense of self-importance within the yakuza world in their autobiographies, to give an example, are all reactions against their placement as the outsiders amongst outsiders, or rather their building of a ‘sub-subculture’ within the yakuza subculture itself. The women living in the yakuza underworld seem to mirror and mimic many of the traditional yakuza rituals, rituals their husbands forbid them from participating in. Such mimicry is often described in their respective autobiographical publications. Yakuza ceremonies such as formal conferences and the sakazuki ceremony are all exclusively male-only affairs. As ane-san Mai Ishihara clearly states in her autobiography:

“Amongst men, as a sign of brotherhood men will perform the sake ceremony, but it will never happen between a man and woman. I really experienced that the yakuza society was centered and revolved around men.”

(Ishihara, 2010; 15)

It is also only the male members who perform the rituals such as the yubitsume, as they are reserved only for formal members of the yakuza organization. Former ane-san Chizue Anzai recalls in her autobiography her husband’s reaction upon her having performed the yubitsume on herself not once but three times; he reacts with extreme anger, telling her that as a woman she shouldn’t have done something so “stupid” (Anzai, 2003; 15). Similarly many of these yakuza wives and ane-sans have adopted the intricate and extensive oriental tattoos across their backs, arms, and chest; the very same tattoos that decorate so many of the yakuza men. These women, having immersed themselves in the yakuza subculture, tattoo themselves in a similar style as formal yakuza members, at times sharing the same designs as their yakuza husbands thus clearly mirroring the actions their husbands have taken. Such female tattooing practices are retold in numerous autobiographies (Anzai, 2001; Ieda, 2007; Ishihara, 2010; Tendo, 2012), as these women confess to having their entire backs, if not more, covered in delicately drawn ink that immediately mark them as belonging to the yakuza subculture to those in the mainstream society and these ane-sans display their skin art amongst each other with clear and visible pride. This mimicking ritual too is portrayed consistently in the Gokudo no Onna-tachi film series, where it is often seen that most if not all the protagonist wives at some point proudly display their adorned backs, flaunting their delicately Oriental tattoos for others to admire.

With such strong negative reactions from their husbands to their adoption of yakuza rituals and customs, the women it seems have merely adopted these rituals amongst the circle of wives themselves, thus creating a sort of parallel ‘yakuza’ world with only female members. Several autobiographies state such mimicking events taking place, below being a perfect example:

“Amongst those girls, there were some who told me, ‘I’ll follow you, ane-san, until I die’. [...] It was only that one girl with whom I exchanged the blood sakazuki.”

(Ishihara, 2010; 83)

These mimicked rituals amongst the wives are also portrayed in numerous Gokudo no Onna-tachi films where female characters exchange rituals of ‘brotherhood’, or rather, in their cases the rituals of ‘sisterhood’, and several ane-sans proceed to perform the yubitsume ritual in the moments when any male yakuza member would do the same. In a memorable scene where two ane-sans of rival syndicates confront each other in a heated argument, we are clearly able to witness how they have adopted the same manner of speech and typical yakuza slang from the subculture as one of the ane-sans angrily demands the other to offer up her pinky as a sign of compliance and apology, an obvious mimicry of their husbands’ and other yakuza members’ behaviors (The New Yakuza Wives: Hell if you Fall in Love, 1994). These examples of women mimicking the traditional yakuza rituals amongst themselves offer an insight as to how these ‘outsiders amongst outsiders’ have created a subculture amongst themselves as a reaction to the discrimination they face based on their gender in an exclusively male world. Though cultural criminologists such as Mike Presdee have confidently stated, “We no longer strive for freedom, rights or achievement: we strive simply for “feelings”’ (Presdee, 2004; 281) perhaps this is not entirely true for those whom themselves are the marginalized within a marginalized group – perhaps it is exactly freedom, rights and achievement that these women seek.
Alternately, another explanation for the creation of this ‘sub-subculture’ can be seen from a cultural criminological perspective, mainly drawing on the points of the state of anxiety and the mundanity of daily routines as stated by Ferrell, Hayward, and Young. The mundanity of routine according to these cultural criminologists is an inevitable byproduct of late modernity, where lives “quickly become routine, ultimately little more than predictable packages of commodified experience” (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008; 107). As one who is not a member of an organization of criminality, it is difficult to believe that those who spend their daily lives living amongst criminals in a criminal subculture face the seemingly ‘pedestrian’ problem of routine mundanity, yet accounts by these women would suggest otherwise. Many ane-sans describe their day-to-day activities as being uneventful and unexciting due to their husbands’ extreme protectiveness of them and their children. They talk of their days spent behind closed windows and curtains, hiding from any potentials dangers in the outside world (Ishihara, 2010). In the portrayal of these women in the Gokudo no Onna-tachi series, many times they are shown to complain of the boredom they face being a yakuza wife, unable to freely do as she pleases but rather having to stay at home on their husbands’ demands (The New Yakuza Wives, 1991).

The fact that many ane-sans voluntarily take on a job on the side may be an indication of their boredom in their daily lives confined to the domestic spheres. Yet at the same time, they live in a state of constant anxiety – perhaps not the same kind of anxiety that Ferrell, Hayward, and Young discuss, an anxiety induced by late modernity, but rather a very physical and straightforward anxiety induced by a constant state of fear.

Adversely, drawing from the theoretical aspects described in Katz’s Seductions and repulsions of crime we can argue that these women are characterized perhaps with a higher degree of a moral fascination with crime and deviance due to their daily life in a world of criminality, especially combined with facing a sense of perpetual boredom. Together these rationales serve as the primary explanation behind the development of the ‘sub-subculture’. The pioneer behind the idea of the seductions of deviance, Jack Katz asserts that there is at the core of deviance the emotional aspect, the fascination of crime. Deviance he argues offers a sense of “self-transcendence”, a means of overcoming the mundanity of daily routines. “At the subjective level, crime is stimulating, exciting and liberating” (Hayward, 2002; 2). It can be argued that for these yakuza wives, criminality is a more tangible part of their daily lives than members of the mainstream society, thus possibly heightening their fascination with deviance. Though prohibited by their husbands from becoming actual criminals, they are able to superficially engage in acts of deviance by mimicking the rituals performed by members of the yakuza organization, which offers them a sense of excitement and even superiority and pride, a “defiant reputation as “badmen”” (Hayward, 2002; 3), much like the yakuza members themselves. Similarly, by taking on jobs that teeter on the edge of legality and illegality such as loan-sharking and racketeering (Otomo in Fiandaca, 2010) these wives may feel the thrill of superficially or even just symbolically engaging in deviant behavior. To enhance this excitement, this sense of superiority and pride stemming from their fascination with deviance, they step out into the limelight with their published autobiographies, their deviance marketed to the general public as a commodity. Altogether these explanations serve to explain why these women may portray a dramatized and exaggerated view of importance regarding their position – the simple lure of and fascination with deviance. The aesthetization and glorification of their deviance, their creation of the ‘sub-subculture’ as seen in the depictions of themselves in the media therefore can be explained through these theoretical factors.

Observing these yakuza wives through different theoretical perspectives, all appear to point to the same concluding point. Living as third-class citizens amongst the second-class, the ‘outsiders amongst outsiders’ in a criminal subculture, these women live their daily lives in a world characterized by anxiety and at the same time mundanity. Their environment has a heightened sense of patriarchal superiority from which they are unable to exert their individual agency. They are unable to drift between the criminal and mainstream and yet they are unaccepted in ‘their’ surroundings. Their subjective perceptions and actions taken therefore can largely be explained as reactions to their positions in the patriarchal yakuza society. As a means of “taking control of one’s destiny” as described by Hayward, they have created a parallel matriarchal society amongst themselves, a ‘sub-subculture’ just for the women. The evidence for this can be seen in their autobiographies and the portrayal of these women in popular media depictions. The “everyday involuntary risks faced by women simply by virtue of being female in a patriarchal society” (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008; 73) is made apparent for us to understand through the accounts of their daily existence. Through the exploration and analysis of their expressed experiences, by paying attention to the representations of their daily existence, we are able to understand their position from their point of view.
Chapter V: Conclusion

“I think the reason that the Yamaguchi-gumi has grown to be such a strong syndicate today is that in the background there were strong women supporting them, don’t you think?”

(Resp. 2)

Through the in-depth and comprehensive examination of the yakuza as both a business organization and as a criminal subculture within the cultural context of Japanese society, and by delving into the perceptions of the women who live their daily lives in this male-dominated subculture, we are able to make some noteworthy conclusions regarding the role of women within the yakuza society and how they perceive themselves and their importance within their environment. In the earlier sections of this research, the preliminary descriptive questions regarding Japanese mafia wives were tackled: Are some women more prone to falling for criminal men? What are their roles, if any, and what influences do they have over their criminal spouses? Through a constant comparison with their Western counterparts, many assumptions were debunked and it was made clear that Japanese yakuza wives are in many ways extremely different from other mafia wives across the globe, firstly that they are not necessarily drawn to yakuza members due to the promise and lure of economic prosperity and security. It cannot be said that some women due to their disadvantaged, lower-class backgrounds for example are more likely to marry into the yakuza subculture; a common stereotype or prevalent mainstream assumption was therefore disproven as false. Going further, we were able to see that unlike Western mafia wives, yakuza wives hold the traditionally assumed ‘passive’ and peripheral roles. They do not involve themselves in their husband’s criminal affairs and merely support their husbands from the shadows, both emotionally and financially. Not only are the roles of women associated to the yakuza entirely different from the roles of women associated to mafias in the Western world, there are fundamental cultural differences between the traditional and long-standing Asian culture dominant in Japan that cannot be blindly compared to the West.

There is the added element that is their concealed manifestation of deviance: their development of a female ‘shadow’ sub-subculture within the yakuza subculture itself. In line with cultural criminological thinking, as a means of gaining control of their lives and their agency, as a clear reaction to their marginalized position as women in the male-dominated yakuza subculture, these women have formed a sense of solidarity amongst themselves whilst living in this stratum of criminality, one which they are not directly participants of yet one which they cannot voluntarily shift from to the legitimate society. These women have adopted mimicry as their means of reaction. Evidence of this parallel sub-subculture can be seen in the biographical and autobiographical accounts written by real-life, modern yakuza wives and ane-sans (Anzai, 2001; Ieda, 2007; Ishihara, 2010; Tsubaki, 2004) and in the film representations focusing on the women in the yakuza underworld, most notably the Gokudo no Onna-tachi film series. These media outlets clearly portray and shed light on how these women have reacted to their less-than-desirable situations as women in a excessively patriarchal subculture by turning around and adopting the exclusively male rituals, decided as so by their husbands, as their own and creating a parallel world of women tied together in their own sakazuki rituals, where women act as the men amongst themselves as the men make it clear they are unwelcome in the larger community. These women “caught in circumstances not of their own making” (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008; 65) show their determined attempt in making sense of such circumstances as well as taking control of their denied agency. Of course it is necessary to address the bias of such accounts, or the exaggeration of the films – as these books and films are based on accounts of women written by women, there is very possibly a skewed perception of self-importance, easily accepted by the female authors such as Ieda themselves without wariness. Yet instead of stopping at this point, in merely accepting the bias as existing, this research has attempted to delve further into understanding why these women portray themselves in this light, why they feel this exaggerated sense of self-importance and seemingly misplaced pride within the yakuza subculture when in fact the gutting truth may be that they are not that important after all. By employing the theoretical tools given to us by cultural criminologists such as Ferrell, Hayward, Young, and Presdee, we are able to see that this too like the creation of the parallel female sub-subculture is simply a reaction of these women to their situation, a demonstration as to how these women “strive to assert themselves in the public sphere” (Brown, 2002; 84). As Jack Katz’s Seductions and repulsions of crime appropriately describes, by constantly living in
and being exposed to criminality through their lives in a criminal subculture, these women may also develop a more sensitive, magnified, and acute fascination with deviance and their construction of a ‘deviant’ sub-subculture and their involvement in legal ‘gray area’ activities such as loan sharking may reflect their desire to participate in this deviance, even if only symbolically or superficially.

This research further demonstrated the importance of analyzing media depictions in undertaking the study of a certain criminological phenomenon. Through these media analyses we are able to reach many of these final conclusions: the conclusions that women in the yakuza underworld perceive themselves with an exaggerated sense of self-importance, the conclusion that these women portray themselves in this manner as a means of commodifying their experiences to the general public and society as a whole, again a means of expressing their perceived importance within the criminal underworld. Without the readiness to explore media depictions, without the theoretical framework provided to us by prominent cultural criminologists, such conclusions would surely have been difficult to reach.

One point can be made with certainty: these women are extremely strong and resilient, more so than they are given credit for. They have been described as the financial backbone of their husband’s daily lives and even the full financial support of their husbands’ yakuza-related activities. The *ane-sans* at the top of the pyramid adopt the subordinate members of her *oyabun* husband almost as if they were her real children, tending to them, resolving their issues, and feeding them – this too providing an explanation for their feelings of self-importance. Their husbands’ criminal lifestyle is not always a life they voluntarily or knowingly choose to enter. Many wives, opposed at first, eventually relent, somewhat sadly stating, “It just so happened that the person I fell in love with turned out to be a yakuza” (Ieda, 2007; 155). They are thus thrown into an extremely unfamiliar world, leaving behind the comforts of mainstream society only to end up as “third-class citizens” in a world of those who are already marginalized (Brown, 2002). In the face of such anxiety and fading confident identities they react in ways that may seem unconventional in comparison with their Western counterparts and may seem less ‘emancipated’, yet it is still very much a legitimate way in which they seek to reclaim their own agency in an overly patriarchal underworld.

Like with other mafia wives across the world, research similar to the one conducted here truly brings to light that the traditional stereotype of women being submissive, passive, and weak are truly just stereotypes and women are much stronger and adaptable than previously believed – and this holds true across the world, whether Western or Asian. Western research has shown that women in organized crime structures are anything but passive and weak, as they are actively and often aggressively involved in the criminal ventures of their respective mafia families. In the case of Japan however they too are not passive, but in a different way from the West; they show resilience, strength, and solidarity in the face of their undesirable situation by creating a sense of community exclusively amongst themselves, in a shadow sub-subculture that is created by the women, for the women.


**Gokudo no Onna-tachi (The Yakuza Wives) Series:**


Taoka, Y. (2003). *Otosan no sekkenbako: aisareru koto o wasurete iru hito e (My Father’s Soap Box: For those who have forgotten that they are loved).* Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten.


