

## Proposal for Tattoo Iconologies

### **Japanese Tattoo Semiotics**

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Tattoo in Japan is usually considered to be an essential part of the criminal underworld, where images on the body are as familiar as cut fingertips. However, the tradition of tattooing in Japan goes way back to the 17/18<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which a specific tattoo culture was related to well-known images from popular stories like *Suikoden*. Taking into consideration, that these stories were the base for colorful full body pieces of tattoo art, there is also a semiotic formula, which can be used to explain the specific components of these large art works on human skin.

In my presentation I will highlight the semiotic considerations of traditional Japanese tattoo artist, as it is so much connected to the *yakuza*, Japanese organized crime groups, today. In a second part I will focus on the perception of these tattoos abroad and in Japan since the Meiji Restoration 1868 to show that the value and cultural appreciation of traditional Japanese tattoo art (*wabori*) tremendously changed in the last 150 years, starting as a common practice among workers, to be stigmatized as criminal emblem in our days.

I will use visual and interview materials from numerous research trips to Japan as sources for this approach, which highlight the diversity of perception within Japan's postmodern society as well.

#### Short Bio:

Dr. Frank Jacob is Assistant Professor of World History at the City University of New York's Queensborough Community College, USA. He has published more than 40 books and countless articles in several languages. His main research foci are Japanese History, Global History, and Cultural Studies.