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Mitsui's Story or Mafia's Story:

A Different Reading of *Mitsui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai*

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Contemporary Japan is often advertised as one of the safest and crime free countries on earth. The number of inmates in Japanese prisons today is an uncomfortable subject for the Japanese. However, crime does exist in Japan, but is well organized and controlled by organized crime networks. The streets are safe in Japanese cities as a result of its organized crime, not in spite of it. In 2001, there were 84,000 registered crime family members of *Yakuza* operating across Japan.¹ The *Yakuza* crime family controls legitimate businesses, but its bread and butter is in loan sharking, gambling, protection, pornography, and prostitution.² These rackets prey on individual vices and human desire. Organized crime in Japan began in the Edo period (1603–1868) as a manifestation of social and economic change, a dividend of an extended period of peace under the Tokugawa shogunate. *Mitsui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai* serves as a window into the growth and development of organized crime and of a crime boss in Edo Japan. It is the story of a Katsu Kokichi, a ronin, or unemployed samurai, and a “criminal servant of the shogan.”³ Even before the Edo period in Japan began, the samurai class were not the honorable ideal that has been popularized today. The samurai were at best soldiers

¹ David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, *Yakuza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 8, 13.

² Kaplan and Dubro, *Yakuza*, 8.

³ Kaplan and Dubro, *Yakuza*, 7.

of fortune, skirmishing, raiding, robbing, and sometimes murdering the unsuspecting for personal gain. In Mitsuo Kure's, *Samurai; An Illustrated History*, the Japanese warrior class was described as "a kind of 'Mafiosi' who fought for family, land and plunder, but scarcely for honor."⁴ This was the reality that Katsu Kokichi would be born into and that he would choose to embrace.

Neo-Confucian thought and Zen Buddhism dominated Edo Japan and strongly influenced the Code of Bushido. Neo-Confucianism stressed filial piety, loyalty, obedience, and a sense of indebtedness to superiors. This was the ideal accepted by Japanese society for all Japanese and especially the samurai. Unfortunately, for Katsu Kokichi and for thousands of other unemployed samurai, this ideal proved to be elusive. With the end of the wars of unification, the samurai class struggled to find relevancy within the shogunate and would compete with the new merchant class for power and influence. Government positions were few in number and Katsu complained about this circumstance when he said: "Often my name was entered on the rolls of candidates, but not once was I given a post, and that I found very galling."⁵ At the top of the samurai class structure more opportunity existed, but at the level of the bannerman, like Katsu, there were few opportunities for the uneducated to achieve government employment. As a result of the realities of the Edo period, Katsu became the antithesis of the neo-Confucian samurai. He was more like a mafia don and crime boss than a righteous man, the ideal described by neo-Confucian thought and bushido. Katsu was a braggart, a bully, a brawler, a wife beater, a hustler, and more importantly a racketeer. He was the epitome of "a criminal servant of the shogun," a street fighter and a thief.⁶ He was a misfit and a juvenile delinquent, an outsider who would join the

⁴ Mitsuo Kure, *Samurai; An Illustrated History* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2001), 10.

⁵ Kokichi Katsu, *Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai*, Trans. by Teruko Craig (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 72.

⁶ Kaplan, and Dubro, *Yakuza*, 5.

thousands of the poor and landless even though he had social status as a samurai. This was the new reality of the peaceful Edo Japan.

Katsu scorned education and only learned to read and write in his early twenties. As a lower level samurai and unemployed retainer of the shogun, Katsu was expected to practice and live up to bushido. Unfortunately, that required money and a government position, two things that Katsu did not have. Instead, he joined the many dispossessed in Edo Japan and he existed and thrived on the fringes of Japanese society. Katsu became by personality and circumstance, attracted to a counter culture of racketeers and ruffians that rose from the gamblers (*bakuto*), street peddlers (*tekiya*) and unemployed samurai (*hatamoto-yakko*).⁷ This counter culture of misfits and juvenile delinquents became the Robin Hoods of Edo Japan, but more importantly would create the beginnings of organized crime. With the new tastes for entertainment in the teahouses and brothels in districts like the Yoshiwara in Edo, a new class of organized criminal rose to take advantage of the new realities. It would not be until after Katsu's retirement that he realized that he had not lived up to the standards expected of a samurai. He would eventually seek education and enlightenment and as a result leave only his autobiography as a warning to his posterity.

Katsu Kokichi began his criminal path with a spiral toward juvenile delinquency in early childhood. "I was naughty from the time I was little and made life difficult for my mother, and with my father away at his office everyday, I acted up and was so headstrong that all were at their wit's end."⁸ Personal honesty (*makoto*) was a tenant of bushido and Katsu was never able to live up to the ideal.⁹ Instead, he became a petty thief at a very early age, a trend that would

⁷ Katsu, *Musui's Story*, 7.

⁸ Katsu, *Musui's Story*, 9.

⁹ Nitobe Inazo, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, 13th ed. (1908; repr., Merchant Books, 2009), 54.

follow him into adulthood. “My mother would put away the sweets and cakes that people gave us. I would steal them, so she took to hiding them here and there.”¹⁰ Katsu continued to steal from his family and would progress from stealing sweets to stealing money. “I began stealing from my mother’s pin money and the cash she had set aside for emergencies.”¹¹

Katsu’s wild and generally dishonest nature coupled with his experiences as a runaway would serve to form his future character. His exposure to beggars, peddlers, and thieves on the Tokaido became a manifestation of the social and economic changes of Edo Japan and would create Katsu’s world view. Katsu was inextricably drawn toward the underworld and people on the fringes of society like himself. He would say, “You’ve got to admit, the friendship between beggars is something special.”¹² If friendship between beggars was special, he would find the friendship between peddlers to be even more sublime. The peddlers in the Edo period, along with gamblers and unemployed samurai, were credited as the fathers of organized crime in Japan. Katsu was exposed to this phenomenon as a teenage runaway and itinerant fisherman and would embrace their ethos and lifestyle. “We would haul the boat about three or four hundred yards inland and set out the nets to dry. Then each of us would be given a small share of the day’s catch to peddle in Odawara.”¹³

As an adult, Katsu makes the leap from street thug and gang leader to racketeer and joins the ranks of organized criminals. He gets involved with illegal “shadow lotteries” and said: “I joined forces with Tokuyama and on “shadow lotteries” alone made ninety *ryo*. Apart from this we easily made ten or twenty *ryo* any number of times.”¹⁴ He becomes a rent collector and an

¹⁰ Katsu, *Musui’s Story*, 11.

¹¹ Katsu, *Musui’s Story*, 20.

¹² Katsu, *Musui’s Story*, 33.

¹³ Katsu, *Musui’s Story*, 40.

¹⁴ Katsu, *Musui’s Story*, 84.

enforcer, and when fired from that position he steals the rents. "I went around to collect the rents that were due and pocketed the money."¹⁵ Katsu becomes a loan shark and begins to loan money at illegal interest rates. "The gambling game gave me the idea of lending money to friends and acquaintances at high interest. It was a profitable arrangement, as I soon found out."¹⁶ Katsu would create and operate a protection racket in Yoshiwara and would brag about his power and authority in the district. "For the last three or four years, I had fallen into dissolute ways and been spending most of my time in Yoshiwara. So much so that the roughnecks who prowled through the quarters had become my underlings and no one dared defy me."¹⁷ Katsu had finally transitioned from petty thief and thug into a crime boss providing protection services in the Yoshiwara district. "I had them patrol the brothels in the vicinity and dispatched a man whenever a customer got out of hand. In return the proprietors sent over gifts of cash. It was all very simple-I was the boss of the entire neighborhood."¹⁸ By his mid-thirties, he had essentially become the boss of all those toughs making a living as enforcers in the Yoshiwara.¹⁹ Katsu move from gang leader to crime boss can easily be compared to a modern Yakuza gangster patrolling nightclubs in the Ginza. In *Yakuza* by David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, a modern gangster named Goro Fujita is described and is hauntingly similar to Katsu. Goro was described this way: "He is, in fact, a former gangster, a veteran of the Tosei-Kai, the largely ethnic Korean gang known for its ruthless control of nightclubs in Tokyo's famous Ginza district. But Goro Fujita no longer patrols the night streets for the 'Ginza Police,' as they were once called."²⁰

¹⁵ Katsu, *Musui's Story*, 87.

¹⁶ Katsu, *Musui's Story*, 111.

¹⁷ Katsu, *Musui's Story*, 106.

¹⁸ Katsu, *Musui's Story*, 145.

¹⁹ David R. Ambaras, *Bad Youth: Juvenile Delinquency and the Politics of Everyday Life in Modern Japan*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.), 17.

²⁰ Kaplan and Dubro, *Yakuza*.

Katsu Kokichi was the creation of the times in which he lived. A samurai with a small stipend and no real prospects, status without economic power, he would turn from sword merchant to a life of crime. Katsu's story is the story of the development of organized crime in Edo Japan and the precursor of modern Japanese crime families like the Yakuza and its offshoot, the Yamaguchi Gumi. Katsu justified his criminal activities by becoming a Robin Hood figure. He began righting wrongs, helping others and displaying ostentatious generosity, a *modus operandi* of crime bosses today. "I always put giving to others first, helping neighbors as a matter of course and those in need according to who they were."²¹ Katsu lived a hedonistic lifestyle and neglected the needs of his family. Like the modern day mafia don, he wore expensive woolen clothing and spent large amounts on his own pleasure while his family were left wanting. His questionable activities were not lost on his successful older brothers and his lifestyle met with their condemnation. "You are wicked and utterly without scruples. And what's this you're wearing-a woolen *haori*? Tell me, what makes you think you can act so arrogantly?"²² The answer was that Katsu had been a failure as a samurai, but had become a respected and arrogant leader of organized crime, a new reality in Edo Japan. Katsu had found his niche in a growing criminal organization and was able to find the respect that he craved, but was denied by the rigid structure of the shogunate. Katsu's criminal creations in Edo Japan and their antecedents continue to reverberate through modern Japanese society today.

About the author

²¹ Katsu. *Musui's Story*, 97.

²² Katsu. *Musui's Story*, 103.

Fred Smithberg is a retired airline pilot and U.S. Marine Corps officer. He is a graduate of the University of South Carolina and of the U.S. Naval War College. Now he lives in Savannah and takes history courses he loves at Armstrong State University.