

[論 文]

## No Tattoos in the Bath:

An exploration into the histories of tattooing and bathing in Japanese culture  
and why the two don't mix in contemporary Japan

Julie Joy Nootbaar

### ABSTRACT

The practice of prohibiting people with tattoos from entering communal baths is common throughout Japan and has recently come under increased scrutiny as the country promotes its inbound tourism industry and continues to vie for hosting international sporting events such as World Cup Rugby in 2019 and the Tokyo 2020 Olympic/Paralympic Games in 2021. This paper explores the history of the tradition of decorative tattooing alongside the history of the practice of communal bathing. Both practices have had connections with religion as well as pleasure, and both have continued as significant elements of Japanese society through the 20th century to today. However, with decorative tattooing becoming a symbol of subversive culture, in particular the yakuza, and communal bathing an integral part of popular culture, prohibition of people with tattoos from entering communal baths became common in the post-World War II era and remains so today. And though tattooing has gained widespread popularity around the world in the first two decades of the 21st century, the stigma attached to the practice remains strong in Japan. But with the rapid increase in inbound tourism, operators of communal bathing facilities, as well as the Japanese visitors to them, will reluctantly need to adjust their attitudes along with their policies, in order to meet the needs of international tourists and the norms of the world beyond Japan.

In 2013, a visiting scholar from New Zealand was refused entry to a hot spring facility in Hokkaido because of her Maori tattoos.<sup>i</sup> And “when it was revealed that Caroline Kennedy, U.S. ambassador to the country from 2013 to 2017, sported two tattoos, one visible -- a small butterfly under her right elbow,” many wondered, “Would she be admitted to Japan’s notoriously conservative hot springs, swimming pools and gyms?”<sup>ii</sup> Numerous English language websites have guides to which public baths (*sentō*) or hot

springs (*onsen*) accept people with tattoos, what kind of tattoos, ways to cover up tattoos, etc., while questions come up regularly on social media regarding tattoos in Japanese bathing facilities. This media attention has put a spotlight on the fact that while tattoos have become increasingly popular among the mainstream population all over the world, Japan has been sluggish in embracing this art form which has been a part of the country's traditional culture and customs for hundreds of years. And while the practice of prohibiting people with tattoos from entering communal baths has been common and quietly accepted throughout Japan, it has recently come under increased scrutiny as the country promotes its inbound tourism industry with vigorous promotional campaigns including bids to host international sporting events such as World Cup Rugby in 2019 and the Tokyo 2020 Olympic/Paralympic Games in 2021. As the nation promotes its hot spring bathing culture as one of the highlights of the Japan experience, it refuses or restricts entry to the increasing percentage of the world's people who are adorned with tattoos and who would otherwise be eager to contribute to Japan's economy by visiting the country and experiencing its famous *onsen*. This has become a particular conundrum as Japan pushes to welcome large numbers of visitors from overseas while being forced to reluctantly accept the diverse cultures and customs those tourists bring with them.

Oita Prefecture, home to Beppu Onsen, one of the most popular hot spring resorts in the country, as well as many other hot spring areas, is the number one prefecture in Japan for hot springs, or as they have coined it, the Onsen Capital of Japan. While heavily promoting inbound tourism in recent years, Oita Prefecture also recently hosted five matches of the Rugby World Cup, which took place in Japan in the fall of 2019, bringing inbound tourists from all over the world. The hosting of the Rugby World Cup was obviously a big event in Japan, being the first time to be held in Asia, and in a country with a very small rugby population. Looking at statistics from 2018, which show representative data for pre-World Cup and Pre-COVID tourism, the famous hot spring resort of Beppu had a population of around 116,000 people and welcomed over 9 million tourists in 2018, including 770,000 from abroad, or 8.6% of the total. Among the approximately 2.5 million overnight visitors to Beppu in that year, fewer than 20% were from outside Japan. Of the total international tourists, 95% were from Asia, with an overwhelming 55% from South Korea, and only around 3% from Euro-American and Oceanic countries. It is this 3% who appear to most likely be adorned with tattoos and who face the problem of finding a place to soak in a spring. In Beppu, there are over 2,200 natural spring wells, the highest number in Japan, with 282 hotels, inns, and other categories of accommodations, virtually all of which have communal hot spring baths, as well as 87 publicly run communal baths and a number of private establishments for communal bathing.<sup>iii</sup>

Viewing the Rugby World Cup matches in Oita Prefecture, with the New Zealand All Blacks camped in Beppu, as a good occasion to promote the resort city to the world beyond Asia, “The Beppu Municipal Government picked 100 hot spring facilities including those with footbaths that allowed tattooed customers to enter, and began efforts to introduce these establishments in English via the Internet”.<sup>iv</sup> Aside from the “footbath” caveat, this sounds like great progress and made national news amidst a government push toward acceptance of diversity ahead of the Olympics/Paralympics and small movement amongst *onsen* operators around the country to rescind their tattoo bans in hopes of attracting international tourist revenue. However, at the same time, the attitudes of Japanese people in general, and the people of Beppu as an example, appear to be lagging behind the efforts towards erasing the stigma and being more inclusive of people with tattoos. “According to an association of traditional Japanese “ryokan” inns and hotels in the city, 70% of such accommodations generally do not accept tattooed people in their hot springs. Though some facilities have decided on a set time to allow such people to bathe, there are continuing cases in which customers who happen to be in the public bath during that time frame complain about being surprised to see tattoos. Therefore, almost none of the facilities view the September Rugby World Cup as an opportunity to lift the ban.”<sup>v</sup>

Beyond Beppu, the percentages appear to be much the same throughout Japan. According to a 2015 survey published by the Japan Tourism Agency of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism given to 3768 hotels, inns, and other establishments with communal bathing facilities around the country, 55.9% prohibit bathing by people with tattoos, 12.9% allow it under certain conditions, and 30.6% allow it unconditionally. As for the circumstances behind the implementation of tattoo bans, 58.6% cite “autonomous decision based on public morals (*fuuki*) and hygiene (*eiseimen*)”, 13% say “agreement among the industry or local businesses”, 9.3% cite “instruction from the police or local government”, with 9.8% citing other reasons, and 9.3% giving no answer. Of those that do allow it, 47.2% say they have received complaints from customers about people with tattoos, while at the same time 78.3% cite they have had no problems associated with tattooed bathers themselves.<sup>vi</sup>

So, the stigma runs deep. But where does it come from? Tattooing has a long history in Japan, beginning with the earliest Yamato people, as well as the indigenous Ainu in Hokkaido and Northern Honshu and the Okinawan people in the Ryukyu Islands in the south. Along with tattooing for ornamentation and other sociocultural purposes, often with religious symbolism, tattooing was also used to mark criminals and outcasts from the early period through to the early modern period, with mention of the practice in the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720). But the type of Japanese tattooing which we are familiar with today, with ornate colored illustrations covering large parts of the torso

and limbs, began during the Edo Period (1604–1867), when it came to be popular as an adornment by people in the working classes. Some evidence indicates that, “In the late 1700s, criminals began to cover their tattoos with decorative designs of their own choosing… herein lies the origin story of the link between organized crime and tattoos.”<sup>vii</sup>

Yoshimi Yamamoto, a professor of cultural anthropology at Tsuru University, believes the spread of ornamental tattooing began in the middle of this period, with prostitutes pledging themselves to a particular customer by tattooing his name on themselves.<sup>viii</sup> So it wasn't necessarily associated with criminal activity, but rather it spread among honest, hard-working carpenters, firefighters, coolies, fisherman, and other laborers who worked often without clothing and who came to adorn their bodies with ink in place of cloth. The act of being tattooed, which required patience, bravery, and strength, came to symbolize those traits in those who adorned them. Common motifs were Shinto and Buddhist deities and other religious symbols, serving as amulets or good luck charms to protect themselves or to fight off evil. Firefighters often had dragon tattoos, to ask for water to come. Flowers and fruit were symbols of prosperity, virility, and growth. Fishermen commonly tattooed peaches, thought of as a sexual symbol by some, but also in hopes that the body will float like one in case of drowning, as well as tattooing their own names, for identification of a floating corpse.<sup>ix</sup>

By the end of the Edo Period in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the type of elaborate, ornate, full torso and limb Japanese tattoos, which we are familiar with today as *irezumi*, had developed into an artform, popular not only among the masses, but spreading into the upper classes and appreciated as art itself, as can be seen in many famous woodblock prints of the time, such as Utagawa Kunihiro and Hokusai. At the same time, another traditional practice, that of communal bathing in public bathhouses, had also become a popular facet of Edo culture. The *History of the Kingdom of Wei* indicates that ritual bathing in Japan for purification after “encountering the pollution associated with death” was being performed as early as A.D. 297<sup>x</sup>, and both the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720) describe bathing practices as being fundamentally linked to mythology and religious folklore beginning with the creation of the Japanese people.<sup>xi</sup> At this time, bathing was related to “a strong identification of evil and immorality with filth and pollution and– by contrast– of virtue and goodness with cleanliness and purity”<sup>xii</sup> This was then extended by the Buddhists in the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century, from which time baths were built in Buddhist temples and opened up to the public, popularizing bathing among the masses for both spiritual and physical cleansing by the seventh century. And although bathing establishments existed for the nobility in Kyoto before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the first commercial bathhouses for the general public were not

opened until 1590 in Osaka and 1591 in Tokyo and the practice of communal, mixed-sex bathing became widespread soon after. By the end of the Edo period, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when the practice of elaborate tattooing among the working classes was flourishing, mixed-sex communal bathhouses had become a popular gathering place and a regular pastime for those same classes of people.

Ordinances prohibiting both mixed bathing and tattooing were periodically issued by the Edo government, for both moral and hygienic purposes, but not enforced to any extent until the so-called opening of Japan to the West in the 1850s and the country's sudden interest in appearing modern and civilized in the eyes of their American and European counterparts. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the practice of tattooing criminals was abolished in 1870, and in 1872, ornamental tattooing was outlawed along with the public nudity ban which also prohibited mixed bathing. Public bathhouses quickly adapted by making structural changes, splitting the baths in half, or at least the entrances to the baths in some cases, but the establishments of tattoo artists reacted to the ban by going underground. Tattoo artists came to work outside the law, and people working outside the law became their primary clientele.

It is interesting to note, however, that while the Meiji Government outlawed tattooing primarily to appear more civilized to the West, the West's appreciation for the artistry of the Japanese tattoo had grown along with the craze of Orientalism and all things artistically and culturally Japanese. That it also symbolized bravery and virility was also attractive to many visitors from Europe and America, and the establishments of tattoo artists flourished, to the blind eye of authorities, in and around the port cities where Western sailors, merchants, and travelers congregated. Well-known cases of famous Westerners who got tattoos in Japan in the Meiji Period include Charles Longfellow, son of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in 1872, Prince Albert, later King George V, in 1881, the Crown Prince of Russia, later Czar Nikolai II in 1891, and Prince Arthur, son of Queen Victoria, in 1906. Numerous travel accounts by Euro-American visitors to Japan during this period mention both tattooing and communal bathing, with the tattooing being praised and often pictorialized in photos or drawings for its artistry, and public bathing criticized for being immoral and unhygienic.

However, despite praise from abroad for this traditional art form, the Japanese came to move away from both what they perceived to be backwards and immoral practices, and as mixed bathing faded and communal but separate bathing flourished alongside a growing number of in-home baths, tattooing among the working classes became less popular while the underground criminal syndicates, or yakuza, adopted and coopted the practice of ornate, full-body tattooing as a symbol of their status outside the law and of bravery, virility, and loyalty to their bosses. The ban on tattooing was lifted by the

Occupation Government in 1948, but its image was furthered by the popularity of so-called “Yakuza Movies” in the postwar 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the connection between *irezumi* tattoos and antisocial/criminal behavior which continues to this day was cemented.

Back to present day Japan. The copious amount of geothermal activity and the association between water and purity have made bathing a popular activity for getting clean both physically and spiritually, as well as for relaxation and enjoyment. Nearly all households have plumbing with bathing facilities, and most Japanese people bathe at home every day, but a trip to the local *sen*to, or public bath, is a popular activity, and a trip to an *onsen* or hot spring resort, is high on the list of desirable leisure activities for people of all ages. In Japan, one is never too far from a natural hot spring bathing facility of some sort, from a cheap, quick communal bath to the most opulent and expensive *onsen ryokan*, or hot spring inn. Mixed bathing still exists, mainly in the form of outdoor baths, but these days communal baths separated by the sexes or rent by the hour “family baths” for the exclusive use of couples, families, or small groups of friends, are more popular. For almost anyone, excluding those with physical impairments for whom these establishments are not compelled to provide access, and for those with tattoos, who are most often outright banned.

How does the law stand on the issue of denying entry by persons with tattoos to public and privately owned bathing establishments? The Public Bathing Establishments Law, established in 1948, states in Article 4 that people with communicable diseases must be refused entry unless given government permission for medical treatment,<sup>xiii</sup> the law does not outright mention tattoos or any kind of physical impairments or alterations. Article 5, however, does, however, give individual establishments the right to prevent people from making the bath “conspicuously unclean or doing any action that might cause damage to public hygiene, (and) the proprietor or manager must control or stop persons doing such actions.”<sup>xiv</sup> While one might assume this to be limited to physical dirtying or lack of hygiene, because it is not explicitly stated, this has been said to be construed so as to encompass a so-called moral uncleanliness such as a tattooed person entering the bath. But is it legally grounded?

In fact, a question regarding this issue was brought to the National Diet on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017 by Hatsushika Akihiro, Member of the House of Representatives from the (then) Democratic Party. The response (Cabinet Decision) stated that having a tattoo could not be applied under Article 4 or Article 5 of the Public Bathing Establishments Law, and therefore bathing could not be refused to persons on the basis of them having tattoos.<sup>xv</sup> This established the legal foundation stating bathing establishments could not legally refuse entry to persons with tattoos, however, to date there has not been a civil case brought to court to demand damages from any establishment which has done so. In

what could be considered a similar case, a civil suit was brought against a public bathing establishment in 2002 for refusing entry to non-Japanese persons. The Hokkaido establishment enacted the ban on the grounds that many foreigners wore their shoes indoors, brought alcohol into the bath, made noise, got soap in the bathwater, etc. However, the court decided in favor of the plaintiff, stating that prohibiting entry to all non-Japanese on the basis of the actions of some individuals constituted “unreasonable discrimination” and was against the law.<sup>xvi</sup> Looking at the Cabinet Decision allowing persons with tattoos in public baths in combination to the legal precedence set by the finding against a foreigner ban in bathing establishments, it can be concluded that it is not legal to put in place a blanket ban on persons with tattoos in bathing establishments, and any restrictions on persons with tattoos would necessarily be limited to those persons who are physically unclean or causing a disturbance.

Laws aimed at curbing organized criminal activity also contribute to potential reasoning for not allowing tattooed persons into bathing establishments. The Act on Prevention of Unjust Acts by Organized Crime Group Members of 1991<sup>xvii</sup> is the cornerstone of regulations enacted to protect the general population from illegal activities by organized crime groups, primarily yakuza, and discourages businesses from having any connection to yakuza groups or members by threat of penalty. Therefore, the general population has a vested interest in avoiding having any connections with yakuza members, as it connects to the protection and promotion of public safety as well as catering to the general public, many of whom are influenced by traditional stigma and uncomfortable sharing water with someone they may fear to be dangerous as well as dirty. As stated earlier, there have been no lawsuits or other legal challenges to this blanket ban, so we have yet to see any attempt at enforcement. However, the 2002 Hokkaido case finding as well as the 2017 Cabinet Decision would indicate that it is not legal to ban all persons with tattoos on the speculation that they may be connected with organized crime, being backed up by protection of human rights as stated in Chapter 3 “Rights and Duties of the People” Article 14 of the Constitution of Japan<sup>xviii</sup>, which states that, “All of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin.”<sup>xix</sup>

However, as we have seen, around 56% of public bathing establishments in Japan, both commercial and publicly operated, actually do ban people with tattoos from entering outright. Around 13% allow it under certain circumstances. These include allowing people with tattoos only in private use, rent by the hour baths, opening baths to “everyone” during designated times, allowing foot baths only, allowing small, what they call “fashion tattoos” (as opposed to traditional *irezumi*), or requiring tattoos to be

covered with skin-colored bandage-like patches, if they are smaller than designated dimensions, which are either provided or available for purchase (*omotenashi shiiru*). Some Japanese are tolerant of non-Japanese people with tattoos but still associate Japanese *irezumi* with criminals, therefore there are places where tattooed foreigners are allowed and tattooed Japanese are not. For the most part, operators of these establishments are interested in accommodating tattooed customers who are primarily non-Japanese, but the fact that the vast majority of customers, and thus the ones who generate the most revenue, are Japanese, means that the target has to remain aimed at them.

Returning to the hot spring resort of Beppu as an example, more than 80% of people staying overnight, and more than 90% of day visitors are Japanese. As a 41 year old hotel executive stated, “There are some customers who feel uncomfortable seeing tattoos, and they can have an impact on the class of an inn. Because administrative agencies are not responsible for taking care of customer complaints and other problems, accommodations have no choice but to become cautious about lifting the ban.”<sup>xx</sup> This is not to say that they are not interested in attracting a more diverse clientele, and attitudes may be changing throughout the city and the country at large, but finding a way to “keep longtime fans of hot springs satisfied and at the same time provide *omotenashi*, or Japanese-style hospitality, to foreigners”<sup>xxi</sup> has proven to be difficult. Travel and tourism related websites and blogs, both publicly and privately run, recommending tattoo friendly establishments (mostly communal bathing facilities but also beaches, which normally also ban tattoos), maps and lists of tattoo OK establishments, and allowing tattooed customers only at certain times or with certain restrictions, are some of the measures being promoted to deal with the issue, but they also perpetuate the discrimination. With all the efforts to push hot spring leisure to attract inbound tourism and at the same time promote diversity and inclusion, changing people’s attitudes towards sharing a leisurely soak with someone who has a tattoo is proving to be a considerable challenge.

Giving, getting, or having tattoos is not illegal in Japan. Therefore, the issue of discriminating against a person on the basis of whether or not they have a tattoo is a very troublesome one in regard to civil and human rights. But aside from discussing the laws surrounding the prohibition of tattoos and tattooing, the subsequent abolition of these laws, and the current laws regarding public bathing establishments, one is forced to contend with the more complicated issue of people’s biases against the traditional and more modern practice of tattooing. At the end of the day, any potential positive economic impact of allowing tattooed foreigners will be weighed against the negative impact of Japanese tourists who are against it. As can be seen in recent data, the number of tattooed tourists remains miniscule in comparison to those who are not.



Therefore, it is not to the great advantage of proprietors of bathing establishments to be more inclusive of a minority when it would alienate the majority. However, as inbound tourists from abroad increase at the same time numbers of people inside and outside Japan who have tattoos increase, the majority of those domestic tourists who might hold on to outdated prejudices will have time to adjust to the changing society and become more inclusive and welcoming of diverse cultures and customs, not only in the bath.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> 「異なる伝統思いやって」入浴拒否のマオリ女性、千葉日報、2013.09.12、  
<https://www.chibanippo.co.jp/newspack/20130912/156020/>、(2022.12.10 access)
- <sup>ii</sup> Mansfield, Stephen. “Japan’s ‘cool’ tattoo culture reflects changing values”. Nikkei Asia, 2022.10.25
- <sup>iii</sup> 平成30年別府市観光動態要覧、別府市観光戦略部観光課、2019 [https://www.city.beppu.oita.jp/doc/sangyou/kankou/toukei\\_r01toukei.pdf](https://www.city.beppu.oita.jp/doc/sangyou/kankou/toukei_r01toukei.pdf)
- <sup>iv</sup> “Oita Pref. hot springs mull lifting ban on tattooed visitors amid cautious sentiment”. Mainichi Shinbun. June 9, 2019.
- <sup>v</sup> “Oita Pref. hot springs mull lifting ban on tattooed visitors amid cautious sentiment”. Mainichi Shinbun. June 9, 2019.
- <sup>vi</sup> 官公庁、入れ墨（タトゥーがある方に対する入浴可否のアンケート結果、2015年。
- <sup>vii</sup> Knauf, Martha. “Ink and Onsen: How to Enjoy Hot Springs If You Have Tattoos”. GaijinPot.com, 01.03.2020.
- <sup>viii</sup> タトゥー規制は「施設ごとに柔軟に対応することが大切」 専門家が指摘、Livedoor News、  
<https://news.livedoor.com/article/detail/17608069/>、2019.01.01.
- <sup>ix</sup> 「漁師と入れ墨」田村勇、「[特集] 風俗としての刺青」、『歴史民俗学』no.16、歴史民俗学研究会、2000年、pp.40-44.
- <sup>x</sup> Clark, Scott. Japan, a View from the Bath. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. p.19.
- <sup>xi</sup> Nootbaar, Julie. My Baths, from How’s the Water by Morisaki Kazue, an annotated translation. Faculty of Social Sciences, School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield. 2002. p. 7.
- <sup>xii</sup> Grilli, Peter. Furo: The Japanese Bath. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd. 1985. p.47.
- <sup>xiii</sup> 昭和三十二年法律第百十九号公衆浴場法第四条「営業者は伝染性の疾病にかかっている者と認められる者に対しては、その入浴を拒まなければならない。但し、省令の定めるところにより、療養のために利用される公衆浴場で、都道府県知事の許可を受けたものについては、この限りでない。」  
e-Gov法律検索<https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=323AC0000000139> (2022.12.12 access)
- <sup>xiv</sup> 昭和三十二年法律第百十九号公衆浴場法第五条「入浴者は、公衆浴場において、浴そう内を著しく不潔にし、その他公衆衛生に害を及ぼす虞のある行為をしてはならない。2 営業者又は公衆浴場の管理者は、前項の行為をする者に対して、その行為を制止しなければならない。」  
e-Gov法律検索<https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=323AC0000000139> (2022.12.12 access)
- <sup>xv</sup> 『入れ墨は「温泉NG」なのに「銭湯OK」の意外なワケ』理崎智英PRESIDENT Online 2019.12.26

<https://president.jp/articles/-/31603?page=2> (2022.12.12 access)

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.* <https://president.jp/articles/-/31603?page=3> (2022.12.12 access)

<sup>xvii</sup> 第一条「この法律は、暴力団員の行う暴力的要求行為等について必要な規制を行い、及び暴力団の対立抗争等による市民生活に対する危険を防止するために必要な措置を講ずるとともに、暴力団員の活動による被害の予防等に資するための民間の公益的団体の活動を促進する措置等を講ずることにより、市民生活の安全と平穏の確保を図り、もって国民の自由と権利を保護することを目的とする。」

e-Gov 法律検索<https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=403AC0000000077> (2022.12.12 access)

<sup>xviii</sup> 衆議院国会関係資料「日本憲法第三章 国民の権利及び義務第十四条 すべて国民は、法の下に平等であつて、人種、信条、性別、社会的身分又は門地により、政治的、経済的又は社会的関係において、差別されない。」

[https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb\\_annai.nsf/html/statics/shiryo/dl-constitution.htm#3sho](https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_annai.nsf/html/statics/shiryo/dl-constitution.htm#3sho) (2022.12.12 access)

<sup>xix</sup> Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet. The Constitution of Japan.

[https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution\\_and\\_government\\_of\\_japan/constitution\\_e.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html) (2022.12.12 access)

<sup>xx</sup> “Oita Pref. hot springs mull lifting ban on tattooed visitors amid cautious sentiment”. Mainichi Shinbun. June 9, 2019.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*