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PHOTOS ANTON KUSTERS

Japan's sharp-suited *yakuza* gangs work from respectable offices and patrol the streets in plain view, but *Bizarre* discovered what goes on behind closed doors...

It's a spring morning in 2009, and a fleet of black cars is making a four-hour journey from Tokyo to a prison in the north. On arrival, 100 suited-up members of the Shinseikai family *yakuza* branch file stiffly into the building and gather around two men who are being released. After some formal bows, the Boss thanks the duo for doing their time without betraying the group. Outside, the metal guard tower looms ominously.

This was Belgian photographer Anton Kusters' first glimpse into the hidden world of the *yakuza* organised crime syndicate. He got the idea to do a project on them during a visit to Tokyo, when he saw well-dressed street boss Souichirou walk past his friend Taka-san's back-alley bar in

Kabukicho, and wondered what the organisation was like beyond films and hearsay. Taka-san set up a meeting for the three of them and Anton's brother, Malik, who lives in Tokyo. It was the first of many during a year, in which Souichirou made sure the westerner was serious about understanding the *yakuza*'s place in Japanese culture. He finally agreed that the trio could present a written proposal of the project and present it to the Boss in a ceremonial envelope (right) and, after weeks of tense negotiations, it was accepted within minutes. Anton was in.



Anton didn't realise, but his friend had taken a big risk by making the introductions. "I didn't know at the time, but Taka-san had staked his life that we'd behave properly. So if I'd fucked up and done something wrong, the *yakuza* would've gone after him!" Anton exclaims. "When I found out, I was stunned."

GANGS OF TOKYO

The modern *yakuza* grew from a mixture of traders and gamblers in the 17th-19th centuries. →

SMOOTH CRIMINALS



THE FAMILY BUSINESS



Two *yakuza* members are released from prison. The guard tower is visible in the background, and street boss Souichirou is on the phone



Gang members control Kabukicho, Japan's red-light district



Using this surveillance camera, Souichirou can see who's knocking on his office door

Unlike Italy's mafia, they operate above ground from offices bearing their family names, and many set up businesses for money laundering. The family Anton followed is a mid-sized mob with around 1,600 members, and Kabukicho is a densely packed square-kilometre of high-rise buildings, with sex clubs, prostitution and gambling on every floor. From his office smack-bang in the middle of the area, stocky, forty-something Souichirou gazes at his grainy CCTV cameras 24/7, searching for signs of crime on the neon-lit streets. If he spots drug dealers, petty thieves or people fighting, he can choose to send a member of his gang after them. In exchange for curbing the disorder, they collect protection money from local businesses.

Anton explains that the *yakuza* flout the law because they live by their own set of ethics. "Yakuza don't think of themselves as criminals, because they feel that they have a duty towards

society," he reveals. "In a way, they're criminal samurai, and they like to think of themselves as good samurai, while the police just see them as gangs. The truth is somewhere in between. They don't have an agreement with the police per se; they're just rooted so deeply in society."

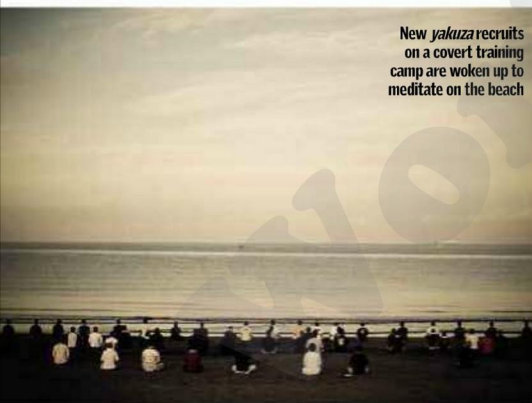
When it comes to ordinary citizens, Anton says many accept the *yakuza* as a "necessary evil" in their lives to keep the peace. "People would rather have the *yakuza* patrol the streets than have nobody doing it, because then the Nigerian or the Albanian mafia could move in, and they have no respect for anyone," he explains. "At least the *yakuza* have some kind of moral code."

The dualism between the law enforcers and the gang members is so ingrained that the Japanese have a saying that 50 per cent of the 'lost youth' – those who drop out of school, and don't feel like they have a future – become police,

while the other 50 per cent become *yakuza*. "They've all grown up together as kids, and that one's become a policeman, and this one's become a criminal," explains Anton. "Somehow throughout the centuries, they've established an equilibrium."

BAND OF BROTHERS

It's easy to see why these lost young men are attracted to the *yakuza*. During annual covert training camps, the *yakuza* "act as a new family for them", says Anton. The recruits sleep on the floor in Spartan barracks and have to get up at 4am, but instead of doing drills they meditate on the beach for an hour, sitting cross-legged in front of the placid ocean. During a typical day, they have an hour of martial arts to learn how to defend, attack and kill; help the local fisherman with his catch; listen to a senior boss deliver a rousing, Obama-style speech; and then study



New *yakuza* recruits on a covert training camp are woken up to meditate on the beach



At the special training camp, recruits master martial arts skills



It's likely this man chopped off his finger to apologise for something. His fingers are tattooed with popular Japanese cartoon characters, which is unusual

more fighting skills and cook together. While Anton was at a camp, the number two of the organisation – the *kaicho* – arrived with his bodyguards to see how it was going. “The visit meant a great deal to the young recruits,” he says. “They were saying, ‘Wow, the Boss is coming!’”

The *yakuza* is built on hierarchies, which follow the *oyubun-kobun*, or ‘master-apprentice’ principle, where the master must instil *yakuza* values and the apprentice must blindly follow orders. If a boss is arrested, sometimes their recruit takes the fall... or it might happen the other way around. “If a master takes the place of an apprentice in jail, for example if he’s been dealing drugs without permission, it makes the younger man feel extremely guilty, and makes him more subordinate,” says Anton.

When the superior has done his time – maybe years – the trainee will formally apologise, and may hack off the end of his little finger to offer as an outward sign of retribution. Anton explains: “Many people think cutting off a fingertip is a form of apology, but it’s actually a way of giving strength to a feeling you wish to express, which is often remorse. You might even do it before his eyes, though that isn’t necessary. The fact you have to do it *yourself* is the key here; it’s all a subtle game of power.”

MOB RULE

Nowhere are these power games felt more acutely than in the presence of the smartly dressed Godfather, who Anton met several times, flanked by his second and third in command. “For me, it was like Francis Ford Coppola’s movie,” Anton says, incredulously. “The guy oozes under-the-skin tension, and impresses anyone who comes in the room. The *threat* of violence is more effective for them than *actual* violence.”

For Anton, this sense of menace was ever-present. The family gave him 100 per cent protection while he was photographing them, but he doesn’t speak Japanese, and had to learn all of



The number two tries to hide his pain as a tattoo master inks him by hand. The artist chooses the design, and it takes about 100 hours to complete a piece. Due to the pain, sessions typically last for around two hours, at 120 stabs a minute. There are few tattoo masters left

“YAKUZA DON'T THINK OF THEMSELVES AS CRIMINALS, BECAUSE THEY FEEL LIKE THEY HAVE A DUTY TOWARDS SOCIETY”

their social customs in order to communicate without offending them. Once he walked into a room of 10 bosses but failed to greet them in order of hierarchy because he didn’t see the third one sitting in the corner. “They were hugely angry,” remembers Anton. “They said to Souichirou, ‘Didn’t you teach these people manners?’ I was new at that time, and it could’ve been worse. I was nervous.”

Tattoos are another way for gang members to show their toughness, and Anton watched the *kaicho* grimace as he received a hand-tapped back piece. “It’s a test of manhood and bravery, so people try to hide pain at all costs,” he says.

“Instead of saying, ‘Ow!’, he’d bite his lip or hold his arm so he wouldn’t look weak.”

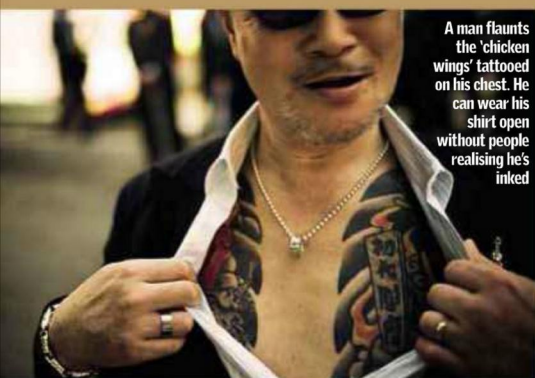
FIGHT CLUB

Despite favouring intimidation over force, Anton describes the *yakuza* as “hardened criminals” who’ve killed and buried disobedient or rival gang members at a secret place in the mountains. “I talked openly to a member about it, and they’ve done it many times in the past, but he admitted that it seldom happens now. It’s weird to hear someone say it as if it’s like going shopping for a loaf of bread. That’s what makes it scary,” Anton admits. →

The Godfather sits at a heavy wooden desk, with the second boss on the right, and the third boss on the left



A man flaunts the ‘chicken wings’ tattooed on his chest. He can wear his shirt open without people realising he’s inked



Souichirou displays his traditional koi back piece. He can wear a shirt to hide his tattoo



Two young bodyguards wait outside a restaurant, as the *kaicho* – number two – walks in



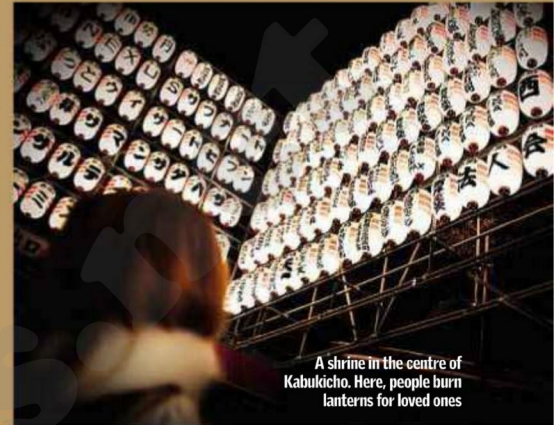
Young *yakuza* members wait for bosses to come out of a meeting, in a back ally of Kabukicho



An exotic dancer performs a reverse striptease on a gang member. He pays for a bunch of two-dollar bills, which she places in his waistband and mouth, before she lays him on his back removes them with her teeth, breasts and thighs. Aside from the dances, many men visit these American-style clubs to chat to escorts about problems they don't want to share with their wives



Bosses wait outside one of their strip clubs in Kabukicho



A shrine in the centre of Kabukicho. Here, people burn lanterns for loved ones

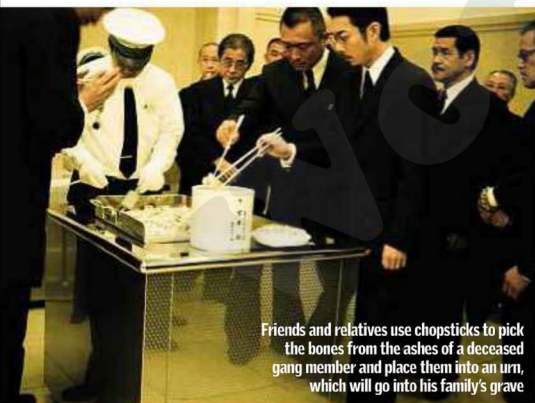
Important *yakuza* members have minders and travel in armoured cars to protect themselves. Once Anton was leaving a gym with the *kaicho* when they heard gunshots. The bodyguards were carrying sports bags containing bullet-proof vests, so they pushed them onto the boss, bundled him into a car, and drove off... only to realise the noises were from fireworks going off in the street. "I could see how alert the family were," Anton marvels. "Other than that, I didn't see any physical violence, just the results of it – bandaged hands, a dented baseball bat, or noticing somebody wasn't there anymore..."

When *yakuza* bosses meet their maker, whether through criminal activity or old age, they're given a typical Japanese funeral.

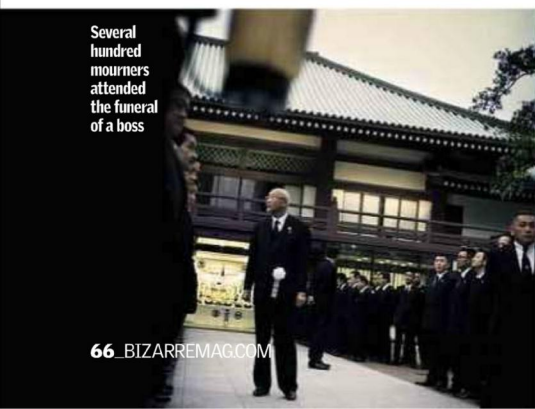
"IT'S WEIRD TO HEAR SOMEONE TALK ABOUT KILLING PEOPLE AS THOUGH THEY'RE GOING SHOPPING FOR A LOAF OF BREAD"

The body is incinerated at a low temperature and guests each pick up a bone with chopsticks and place it into an urn, which is put into the family grave. When a boss died from a stroke, his blood relatives allowed Anton to photograph the rites, and even participate in them. "It was strange for me," says Anton, "but it was respectful of them to see that I was part of his life and that it was only natural I should pick a bone for him."

Anton reserves judgement when it comes to the morality of the *yakuza* – though he condemns violence – and this sense of respect is what stands out for him as he reflects on his time with them. "They respect a way of doing things, and so they also do *disrespectful* things in a respectful way," he says. "While law enforcement regard being *yakuza* as a set of criminal actions, the *yakuza* see it as a way of life." ¹⁸



Friends and relatives use chopsticks to pick the bones from the ashes of a deceased gang member and place them into an urn, which will go into his family's grave



Several hundred mourners attended the funeral of a boss



The body of a *yakuza* member lies in a coffin before his traditional funeral. He died from a stroke