

Men of Honor and Violence  
An Exploration of the Differences Between the Sicilian Mafia and the Japanese Yakuza

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When *the Godfather* made the Sicilian Mafia famous in 1972, the image of the organization became one of endless monologues, thick, Italian-accented English and subtle shootouts against other *Famiglie* [families] while out shopping for groceries. The media had no qualms romanticizing this overly glorified image, adding prestige to an organization that prides itself in extortion, drug trafficking and loan sharking. After all, little information exists to begin with, thanks to *omertà*, the Mafia's code of silence. In Japan, however, the image of the Yakuza is not so idealized due to their iconic lack of secrecy and subtlety. Also dealing in highly illegal businesses, the Yakuza has become infamous for its supposed unconcealed gang violence and blatantly extravagant behavior. Though these two organizations show signs of being cut from the same cloth, as they both deal with the same types of illegal activity, the Mafia and the Yakuza have taken completely different perspectives of the violent spectrum of organized crime, differing almost completely in their ideologies, structures and principles.

In order to understand these two organizations and where their differences lie, one must first understand how they began. The Sicilian Mafia, also known as *la Cosa Nostra* [lit. "our thing"], is the youngest of the pair. As a result of this organization's tight-lipped secrecy, little information exists regarding its true genesis. It has been surmised by many, however, that this particular criminal syndicate originated in the nineteenth century due to an upheaval of Italian feudalism. Sicily especially, as a colonial territory, endured frequent government changes and shifts in power. "Both these factors...made it difficult for the population to identify with the exponents of government..." and without any formal government to identify with, the Sicilian people developed mistrust, and even hostility, toward the institution.<sup>1</sup> By providing these people with the protection and steady business their government could not secure, the Mafia assured

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<sup>1</sup> Henner Hess, *Mafia and Mafiosi: Origin, Power and Myth*, (New York City: New York University Press, 1998), 16.

their own rise to power.<sup>2</sup> By the time the Italian states were unified in 1860, it was likely that the Mafia had rooted itself deeply in Sicilian culture. The current state of Sicily struggled just to be able to establish itself, especially since no such authority existed on the remote island prior to the unification.<sup>3</sup> Thus, with the trust of the people in hand, the future of the Sicilian Mafia was secured.

The Mafia's power remained unchallenged, however, until the rise of Italian Fascism in 1922. Benito Mussolini, the leader of the Fascist movement, called for an extinction of the Mafia, and largely succeeded in his quest to do so. By monopolizing protection and offering better deals than the *mafiosi* [pl. members of the Mafia], the Fascists were able to control the Mafia and weaken its grasp on Italy.<sup>4</sup> The Fascist regime, however, fell with the death of Mussolini, and American occupation in 1943.<sup>5</sup> Again, Italy entered a period of unstable government, allowing the Mafia to move in and, once again, provide paid protection to the Sicilian population. In the years following the Second World War, the Mafia fully integrated itself into the Italian state, setting the stage for the modern development of this criminal organization.

In contrast to the Mafia, the Yakuza's origins, however, lie in Japan's *Edo*, or *Tokugawa*, era, which dates back to the seventeenth century. After the *Azuchi-Moyama* period of unification came to an end in 1603, the *Tokugawa Shogunate* gained control over the Japanese government, bringing 250 years of peace to its people. Toward the middle of this era, three early versions of what are now known as Yakuza emerged: the *shishi*, the *tekiya*, and the *bakuto*. Generally

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<sup>2</sup> Louise I. Shelley, "Mafia and the Italian State: the Historical Roots of the Current Crisis," *Sociological Forum* 9, no. 4 (1994), 667.

<sup>3</sup> Diego Gambetta, *the Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>5</sup> Louise I. Shelley, "Mafia and the Italian State: the Historical Roots of the Current Crisis," *Sociological Forum* 9, no. 4 (1994), 668.

lower-ranking samurai, the *shishi* became violent protectors of the early modern state. Their increasing dissatisfaction with the *Tokugawa Shogunate*, however, led them to take up arms against the government they swore to protect. This group did not outlast the *Meiji* Restoration period, but did inspire patriotism in later branches of the early Yakuza.<sup>6</sup> The *tekiya*, also known as the *yashi*, were opportunistic peddlers who united as gangs, and the *bakuto* were powerful underworld gamblers who also began the operation of money lending, or “loan sharking.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike the *shishi*, who involved themselves in political affairs because of their concern for the nation, the *bakuto* immersed themselves in the government because of their physical prowess.<sup>8</sup> Forming families, these “violence specialists,” as they were recognized, flourished during the feudal era of Japan and eventually evolved into the modern Yakuza. They moved away from gambling and eventually adopted other methods of earning money and holding power, as loan sharks in the area of prostitution and extortionists.

Similar to the Mafia, the Yakuza also remained unchallenged until the Second World War. When Japan developed into an imperialist country, the Yakuza lost its grasp on society. With Japan’s drastic loss at the hands of the Allied Powers and America’s occupation, the Japanese government suffered a transitory collapse. Without a police force to keep control in the streets, a great opportunity to take control of the population presented itself to the Yakuza once more. Black market goods became the sole source of survival for Japanese people, who were starving and desperate for a powerful institution to provide them with stable ground. By allowing this criminal organization access to economic and political power, they were able to

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<sup>6</sup> Eiko Maruko Siniawer, *Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists: the Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860 – 1960*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Peter B.E. Hill, *the Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law and the State*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 36-38.

<sup>8</sup> Siniawer, 20.

begin the slow process of developing into what is now known as the modern Yakuza.<sup>9</sup>

As stated before, there are several ideas that set these two criminal syndicates apart, aside from their diverse histories. From the information researched, it is irrefutable that the ideologies of both the Mafia and the Yakuza differ in many respects. As an organization of high standing within Sicily, the Mafia operates on many different types of criminal enterprises, namely extortion, drug and arms trafficking, and loan sharking and earn “more than \$95 billion a year,” making up seven percent of the Italian economy.<sup>10</sup> In modern Sicily, the majority of the organization’s money, however, comes from the business of “paid protection,” or extortion. Business owners in Palermo, Sicily’s capital, are forced to pay an unofficial tax, or *pizzo*, to the Mafia in order to stay in business.<sup>11</sup> If business owners refuse to pay this tax, the consequences can be fatal, ranging anywhere from death threats and sabotage to murder. The constant fear of facing these types of ramifications insures a steady flow of money from Sicily’s citizens to the Mafia. In 2004, however, the citizens of Palermo, tired of living in constant fear of the Mafia, began the *Addiopizzo* [lit. “good-bye pizzo”] movement, in order to finally free themselves from the heavy burden of extortion.<sup>12</sup> Despite initiating a huge blow to the Mafia’s hold over Sicily, the *Addiopizzo* movement has yet to stop the business of extortion, as many businesses refuse to join the movement for fear of death, proving just how powerful the Mafia remains.<sup>13</sup>

Within the world of the Yakuza exists the same type of criminal behavior, as with the Mafia. These enterprises are known as *shinogi*, which roughly translates to “a helpless

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<sup>9</sup> Peter B.E. Hill, *the Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law and the State*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 42-44.

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Moore, “Italy’s Biggest Business: the Mafia,” *Telegraph.co.uk*, October 23, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Fraser, “Sicilian Businessmen Fight Mafia,” *BBC News*, September 3, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> “Addiopizzo,” Addiopizzo, <http://www.addiopizzo.org/english.asp>, (accessed October 29, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> “A Bullet for a Businessman,” *Business Week*, November 4, 1991.

condition; to be driven up the wall;” a perfect culmination of the ideas that portray the Yakuza.<sup>14</sup> The majority of Yakuza income comes from *shinogi*, predominately gambling, protection, drug trafficking, prostitution, loan sharking and racketeering. In 1989, the majority of their income seems to have come from the sale of amphetamines (roughly 34.8% of \$14.5 billion) and gambling (16.9%).<sup>15</sup> It was also estimated that in 2004, the Yakuza’s “illegal income was between [\$12 billion] and [\$18 billion]. The amount the Yakuza receive[d] through legal means is unknown.”<sup>16</sup> In 2007, rough calculations suggested that there could be as many as 80,000 members in at least twenty-one different gangs, the largest and strongest being the *Yamaguchi-gumi*. Not only does the Yakuza have their hand in the Japanese economy, they also exert a large effect on politics, since their steady rise during the postwar era of Japan. Japanese citizens, however, have taken measures against the Yakuza, forcing them even deeper underground, but they are still largely unsuccessful at interrupting their activity. Surprisingly, this organization still continues to be tolerated by others owing to the fact that, “despite their occasional violence, the yakuza serve two useful purposes as a ‘necessary evil.’”<sup>17</sup> First, the Yakuza, unlike the Mafia, plays a part in a business that stresses social harmony, and second, this organization is able to provide “order, discipline and self-esteem” to young, wayward individuals who would cause more damage if they belonged to a less structured gang, or left to their own devices.

All of the ideologies of these two groups, however, come together within their “codes of honor.” The culmination of the Mafia’s ideologies, however, laid the groundwork for the Ten Commandments. Discovered by the Italian Police Force during the arrest of Mafia boss

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<sup>14</sup> Peter B.E. Hill, *The Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law and the State*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Johnston, “From Rackets to Real Estate, Yakuza Multifaceted,” *the Japan Times*, February 14, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

Salvatore Lo Piccolo, the Ten Commandments are hardly comparable to the original ten found within the contents of the Bible. The Sicilian Mafia's Ten Commandments are like a "guide to being a good mobster" and provide ten general rules that every *mafioso* must follow.<sup>18</sup> (See: Appendix A). Despite the questionable business they are infamous for, *mafiosi* have also been known, among themselves, as "Men of Respect." Therefore, it is to be expected that their Ten Commandments also include rules for being respectful. The Commandments involve avoiding clubs, always being available for the Mafia (even if the *mafioso*'s wife is in labor), never being seen with, or working with, police officers, and the general ideas of how the organization operates as a whole. Along with other important documents found at Lo Piccolo's hideout, the Commandments offered a new insight onto the Sicilian Mafia's social hierarchy and business.

While the Mafia has its Ten Commandments, however, the Yakuza work with *bushido*, the Way of the Warrior. While a more modern version of this *samurai* code of honor does not exist within writing, it has been implied that members of the Yakuza still attempt to follow this code. The history of Japan is one of honor, so it is no surprise that even its criminal underworld would adopt the respectful, and honorable, code of the *samurai*. Two concepts of bushido, *giri* and *ninjo*, are two predominant beliefs that are practiced among members of the Yakuza. "*Giri*, or obligation, refers to the strong sense of duty that is felt between members... *Ninjo* [roughly translates] to emotion, or human compassion, and denotes 'generosity or sympathy toward the weak and disadvantaged, and sympathy towards others.'"<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, *bushido* is not always practiced among members of the Yakuza, especially among its younger initiates. Postwar Japan introduced a degradation of the Yakuza's structure and an introduction of more violent gangs,

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<sup>18</sup> "Mafia's 'Ten Commandments' Found," *BBC News*, November 9, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Altman, "History and Culture of the Japanese Yakuza," <http://altman.casimirinstitute.net/yakuza.html>, (accessed October 28, 2009).

such as the *bosozoku*, Japanese biker gangs, and *boryukudan*, or violence gangs.<sup>20</sup> This degeneration of moral values within the organization is even seen as a problem among its own members and has inspired many to keep the Yakuza under control. Despite this rise in a morally deficient generation of Yakuza members, however, this organization still remains a large part of Japanese culture.

Like any kind of organized institution, the Mafia and the Yakuza are structured into social hierarchies in order to maintain balance and display dominance within the ranks of their syndicates. The Sicilian Mafia is made up of several clans, or *Famiglie*, and is structured in a typical patriarchal pyramid (see: Appendix B), with the boss, or *capo famiglia*, seated at the top. Below him is his *consigliere*, or personal advisor, and the *sottocapo*, or under boss. The *capidecina*, or captains, rest underneath them and “coordinate the activities of the men of honour placed in their trust” as well as the *affiliato*, men waiting to become “men of honor,” or members of the Mafia.<sup>21</sup> There are a few prerequisites, however, that need to be met before one can be considered for induction into the organization. As discovered in the home of Lo Piccolo, along with the Ten Commandments, existed an insight into Sicilian Mafia’s initiation ritual. As stated in the Ten Commandments, people who cannot be a part of the Mafia are: “anyone who has a close relative in the police, anyone with a two-timing relative in the family, anyone who behaves badly and doesn't hold to moral values.”<sup>22</sup> The initiate must also be of Sicilian descent, as his bloodline will be examined before he is initiated. The initiation ritual itself involves “knives, blindfolds, blood, fire and the invocation of a saint.”<sup>23</sup> After the cutting of the initiate’s

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Guido LoForte, “THE SICILIAN MAFIA: A PROFILE BASED ON JUDICIALLY CONFIRMED EVIDENCE,” *Modern Italy* 9, no. 1 (2004), 70.

<sup>22</sup> “Mafia’s ‘Ten Commandments’ Found,” *BBC News*, November 9, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Diego Gambetta, *the Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 149.

trigger finger, his blood is smeared on the holy image of the saint before the *capo* sets it aflame and places it in the initiate's hand while he recites, "I swear to be faithful to *Cosa Nostra*. If I should betray it, my flesh must burn, just as this image burns."<sup>24</sup> Once initiated, there is no going against the Mafia, as the end result of betrayal is death.

Like the Mafia, the Yakuza also structures its organization in a simple pyramid arrangement, with a boss seated at the top and his subordinates beneath him. However, the hierarchy within this syndicate is more intricate than that of the Mafia's, especially when it comes to the relationship between its members. The Yakuza operates on an *oyabun-kobun*, or father-son, relationship (see: Appendix C), which "connects individuals to each other rather than to a group," an important aspect of Japanese society.<sup>25</sup> Seated at the right hand of the *oyabun*, or boss, is the *komon*, or senior advisor. The *wakagashira* (number-two man) is a regional boss assisted by the *wakagashira-hosa* in governing several gangs of his own. Typically, a Yakuza family will also have many *shatei* (young brothers) and *wakashu* (junior leaders) beneath the upper strata of the family. The prerequisites for joining the Yakuza are much simpler than the Mafia's, as members of this gang generally join of their own volition; they do not need to be from a certain area of Japan or behave a certain way. The initiation ritual is also much different from the Mafia's, as the bonds between the *oyabun*, and his subordinates are established by a ritual exchange of *sake*, Japanese rice wine. The *kobun* "must promise unquestioning loyalty and obedience to his boss," and, in exchange, receives "protection and good counsel." From that moment on, the *kobun* has sworn absolute loyalty to the Yakuza.<sup>26</sup> Due to this effortless process

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<sup>24</sup> "Police discover Mafia's 'Ten Commandments' after arresting Godfather," *Mail Online*, November 8, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Peter B.E. Hill, *the Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law and the State*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 67.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Bruno, "the Yakuza, the Japanese Mafia," [http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/gangsters\\_outlaws/gang/yakuza/2.html](http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/gangsters_outlaws/gang/yakuza/2.html), (accessed October 29, 2009).

of initiation, the Yakuza has secured a steady increase of members, and it is the group's relaxed principles that continue to attract new initiates.

To the Mafia, however, subtlety is everything, and the basic principles of this organization dictate the importance of secrecy. Little information exists on this organization due to the fact that its members swear to silence and work in privacy. The Mafia's code of silence, also known as *omertà* [lit. "manhood"] has to come "signify specially the capacity for maintaining silence under adverse conditions..." and holds great value over the members of this particular criminal syndicate.<sup>27</sup> Obedience is everything in an organization that prides itself in its secrecy, and any failure to comply is not taken lightly, with consequences ranging as far as death. As sworn on the day of his initiation, the *mafioso's* flesh burns in the event of betrayal. There is absolutely no turning back once the *mafioso* makes the decision to go against the Mafia and, even with police protection, he is never safe. This secrecy exists to protect the Mafia and ensure a steady business without the interference of the police. Therefore, betrayal is not tolerated, especially when each *mafioso* has taken an oath to stay loyal to his *Famiglia*.

Yet, while the Mafia slips through the shadowy underground of Sicily, the Yakuza are not so subtle. In fact they are anything but, and pride themselves in blatantly extravagant behavior. This is made obvious by their own lack of secrecy, and the basic principles that keep this organization functioning in modern Japanese society. A few rituals that Yakuza practice could almost be seen as ways of boasting about their gang affiliation. For instance, members of the Yakuza dress extravagantly, with "shiny tight-fitting suits, pointy-toed shoes and longish pomaded hair."<sup>28</sup> Neon signs are proudly displayed outside of Yakuza headquarters, making it

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<sup>27</sup> Diego Gambetta, *the Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Bruno, "the Yakuza, the Japanese Mafia," [http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/gangsters\\_outlaws/gang/yakuza/2.html](http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/gangsters_outlaws/gang/yakuza/2.html), (accessed October 29, 2009).

evident that members of this organization do not fear being known. Members of the Yakuza also have full body tattoos, also known as *irezumi* [lit. “insert ink”] tattoos. Often very painful and incredibly time consuming, these tattoos are hand-poked and inserted underneath the skin using non-electrical instruments and can take as long as a hundred hours to complete. These traditional Yakuza tattoos involve ornate designs of flowers, *koi* fish, dragons or conventional Japanese landscapes.<sup>29</sup> While these tattoos are usually hidden underneath the Yakuza member’s suit, his gang affiliation becomes evident when his clothes are removed, or even if his sleeves are rolled up. As a result of this, tattoos have been banned in most public baths in order to prevent gang violence. In spite of that, Yakuza members still choose to proudly, and permanently, brand their flesh with what they consider to be works of art.

The Yakuza, like the Mafia, have their own form of inter-gang punishment. While *omertà* promises a swift death for all who go against this code, the Yakuza engages in the act of *yobitsume*, or the gesture of severing the last joint of the little finger as a form of apology. “A second offense will require the severing of the second joint of that finger, and additional offenses might require moving on to the next finger.”<sup>30</sup> After receiving a sharp knife from his superior, the offender performs the ritual on himself, in a tradition that dates back to the age of the samurai. When the only way of survival meant wielding a sword, the severing of the pinky finger, which is the strongest in swordplay, weakened the samurai’s grip on his sword. Though this ritual seems superfluous in the age of automatic weaponry, it remains as a Yakuza tradition, if only for its symbolism. Rather than murdering the offending member, they are made an example of and their affiliation with the Yakuza becomes known to all who look upon his hand.

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony Bruno, “The Yakuza, the Japanese Mafia.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

It is made evident by the information available that both the Mafia and the Yakuza have violent, bloodstained pasts and deal in questionable affairs. On the outside, these two syndicates may seem indistinguishable as structured gangs with solid holds over their respective communities. Upon further investigation, however, it becomes apparent that this idea is only the tip of the iceberg. Though the Mafia and the Yakuza seem identical, they have developed differently as a result of their diverse cultures and rich histories. Without the change in government during the post-feudal era in Sicily, the Mafia would have never began the lucrative business of private protection, and, without the fall of Fascism, the Mafia might not even exist in the world today. In Japan, as a result of the evolving interest groups that developed during the *Tokugawa* era and Japan's heavy loss to the Allied powers during World War II, the Yakuza was able to force its way into modern Japanese society and become the "necessary evil" that the nation needed, and still needs today. Owing to these facts, these syndicates disagree in regard to their ideologies, social structures and principles. Seemingly cut from the same cloth, the Mafia and the Yakuza, in reality, make up their own diverse quilts that contribute, in both positive and negative ways, to the societies in which they exist.

## Appendix A

The Mafia's "Ten Commandments"	The original Ten Commandments
1. No-one can present himself directly to another of our friends. There must be a third person to do it.	1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me
2. Never look at the wives of friends.	2. Thou shalt not make for thyself an idol
3. Never be seen with cops.	3. Thou shalt not make wrongful use of the name of thy God
4. Don't go to pubs and clubs.	4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy
5. Always being available for Cosa Nostra is a duty - even if your wife's about to give birth.	5. Honor thy Father and Mother
6. Appointments must absolutely be respected.	6. Thou shalt not murder
7. Wives must be treated with respect.	7. Thou shalt not commit adultery
8. When asked for any information, the answer must be the truth.	8. Thou shalt not steal
9. Money cannot be appropriated if it belongs to others or to other families.	9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor
10. People who can't be part of Cosa Nostra: anyone who has a close relative in the police, anyone with a two-timing relative in the family, anyone who behaves badly and doesn't hold to moral values.	10. Thou shalt not covet

Fig. 1: "Mafia's 'Ten Commandments' found," *BBC News*, November 9, 2007.

Appendix B

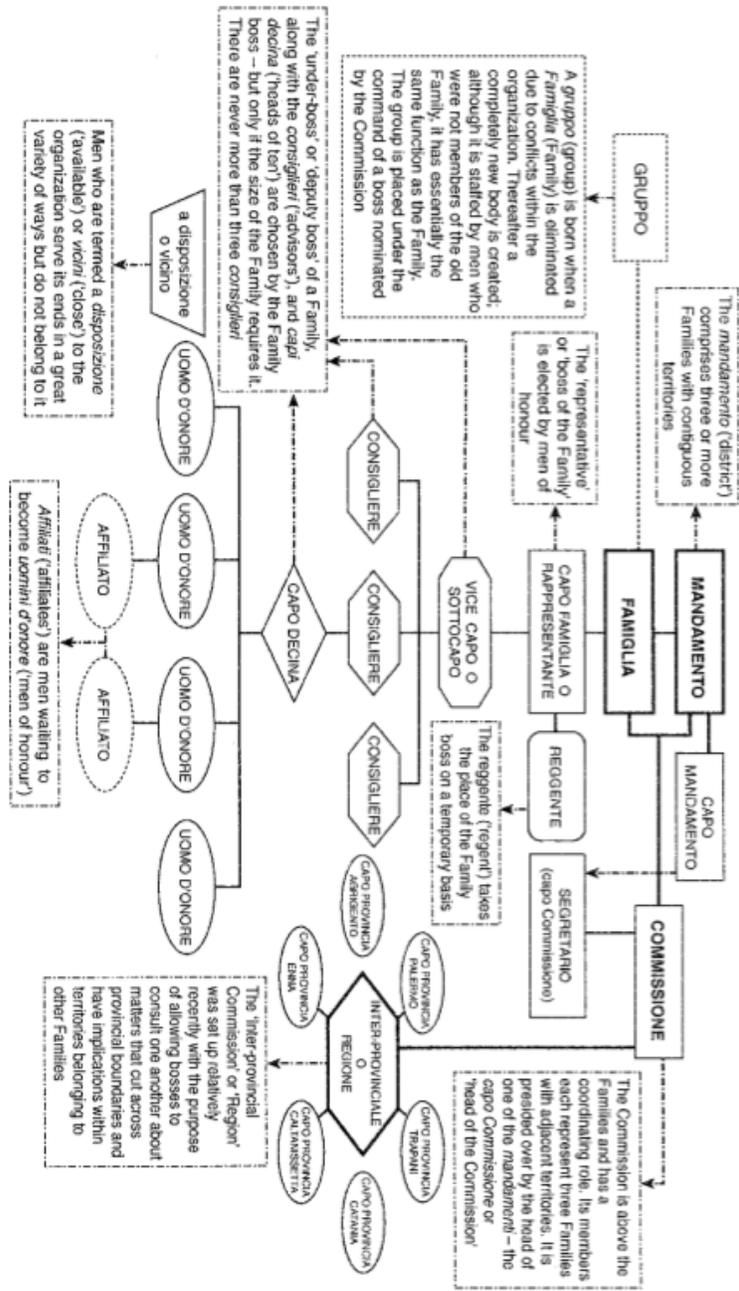


Fig. 2: Guido LoForte, “THE SICILIAN MAFIA: A PROFILE BASED ON JUDICIALLY CONFIRMED EVIDENCE,” *Modern Italy* 9, no. 1 (2004), 88.

Appendix C

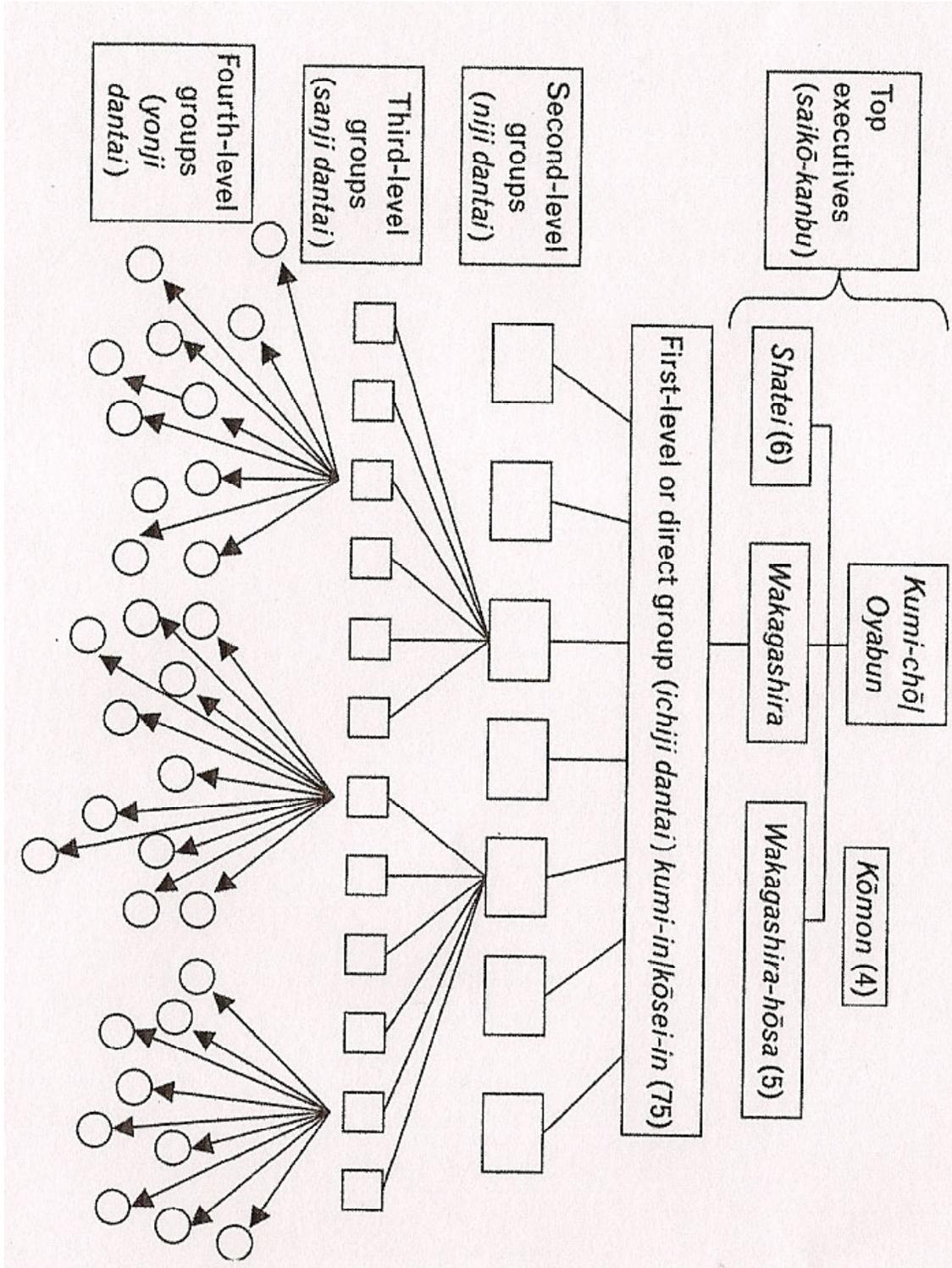


Fig. 3: Peter B.E. Hill, *the Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law and the State*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 69.

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