

Discrimination Against Japan's *Burakumin* Community

By Caroline Taïeb

Discrimination against the *Burakumin* people has infiltrated Japanese society for centuries and still exists today, proving particularly difficult to stamp out as the ways in which members of this minority group are marginalised change from one era to the next.

Discrimination against *Burakumin* people of Japan is a relatively little-known phenomenon in France. The issue is considered to be a violation of human rights and as such, is being discussed within the international forums responsible for protecting the individuals concerned. The proliferation of discriminatory acts and comments on the Internet prompted the Japanese government to adopt a “law to eliminate discrimination against the *buraku*” (*Buraku sabetsu kaishō hō*) in December 2016. However, whilst it does represent the official recognition of continued discrimination despite the positive discrimination measures put in place between 1969 and 2002, there is still considered to be insufficient Japanese legislation to fight it. The exclusion that members of this minority group experience is unusual in that there is no phenotypic, ethnic, religious or even linguistic difference that differentiates them from other Japanese people, and whilst this inequality of treatment is much less visible in today's society than it was in the 1960s, it is proving difficult to stamp out and manifests itself covertly in terms of employment, marriage and day-to-day life. Still a taboo in Japanese society and an issue that is not discussed or debated, it remains a controversial topic, as demonstrated by the discriminatory comments recently made by former television presenter Hasegawa Yutaka, supported by the Japan Innovation

Party in his candidacy for election to the Chamber of Councillors (the equivalent of the Senate), from which he eventually stood down. According to Japanese newspaper Asahi, he said of the discriminated segments of pre-modern Japan—considered by the majority of Japanese people as the ancestors of the *Burakumin*—at a conference held in Tokyo in February that they were inferior to the human race and had a propensity for crime and violence. These comments bear testimony to the prejudices still held against the *buraku* and their inhabitants, who move within both upper and working¹ class circles. The grounds for this discrimination are changing over time, which leads us to question the reasons for its continuation. Such a categorisation, however, primarily poses a number of problems in terms of its definition, the boundaries of which are vague and arbitrary.

Defining a *buraku* and a member of the *Burakumin* community in modern terms

Research on the *Buraku* issue in Japan has highlighted difficulties in accurately defining these two terms and what they refer to. From a linguistic perspective, the Japanese word *Burakumin* is made up of the word *buraku*, meaning ‘hamlet’ or ‘village’, and the suffix *-min*, which could be translated in this context as ‘people’. The word therefore literally translates as “the people of the hamlet”. They are considered by the majority of Japanese as the descendants of the *Eta*—a group that devoted itself primarily to agriculture and other trades such as treating dead animal skins, surveillance work and executing the condemned—and the *Hinin*, who were mainly beggars. These two groups fell into the *Senmin* category, translating as “people of the lower class”, which included a variety of other individuals of various names and professions in the pre-modern era (1600-1868). The *Senmin* were considered inferior to the four conditions that prevailed at the time and into which the population was divided, i.e. warriors, peasants, craftsmen and merchants. Some *Senmin*, like the *Eta*, had the unusual skill of being able to deal with the defilement associated with death, which was why they handled the skins of dead animals in order to tan them to make leather goods, among other things. Those who possessed this ‘skill’ were considered to have a defiled existence and were excluded by the rest of the Japanese population.

¹According to the results of our investigation performed as part of a doctoral thesis being completed at the EHESS and the University of Kansai under the supervision of Serge Paugam and Ishimoto Kiyohide.

Even the *Eta* people, who were no longer practising this activity in the pre-modern era, continued to be perceived as defiled² beings, whilst other *Senmin* populations were simply undervalued within society. An emancipation edict abolishing this status was promulgated in 1871, yet the *buraku* are now referred to by non-*Burakumin* peoples as the residential areas formerly inhabited by members of these groups. It is important to note, however, that contact with other groups not falling into the *Senmin* category but that also had the ability to remove any defilement by cleansing the contaminated areas was avoided and that the residential areas they once inhabited are also now considered *buraku*. The stigmatisation of and discrimination against the *buraku* and its inhabitants therefore continue to this day and are based solely and arbitrarily on their place of residence. Of course, the areas currently considered to be *buraku* are ultimately those that people consider as such,³ and moving away from the *buraku* offers no guarantee of escaping this stigma as it would still be transmitted through blood.

Defining the term *Burakumin* is therefore problematic since the population living in these areas changes over the years. Indeed, many of those who have moved to the *buraku* without any family ties to the *Burakumin* people would also be at risk of suffering discrimination. This being the case, a *Burakumin* is an individual who is referred to as such by a non-*Burakumin*. It is ultimately the one who discriminates that decides who passes for a *Burakumin* and who does not.

The Japanese government introduced a series of positive discrimination measures in the fields of education and employment between 1969 and 2002 with a view to eliminating discrimination and inequality in these areas, which resulted in the *buraku* targeted by these measures being designated by the government as assimilation areas. A number of the decision-makers within the *buraku* themselves did not wish to accept this status, meaning that certain areas are not designated. There is therefore a distinction to be made between those areas that have been redeveloped and those that have not. The last census conducted in 1993 indicated that there were some 4,442 assimilation areas throughout Japan, with an estimated 892,751 inhabitants.⁴ Sociologist Ishimoto Kiyohide, however, estimates that there are around 6,000 *buraku* that have not been designated, meaning that the *Burakumin* population is likely to be much larger than the population covered by the census.

²Kiyohide, I., Discrimination Research Seminar, University of Kansai, 1 October 2012.

³Idem.

⁴Ryūshi, U., Shingo, T. and Naoko, S., *Buraku mondai no ima* ('The Buraku Problem Today'), in Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute, *Sabetsu kinshi hō seitei o motomeru tōjisha no koe* ('The Voice of Those Who Want a Law Against Discrimination'), Osaka, 2017, p.9.

The defilement and exclusion of the *Burakumin*⁵

If we consider the role that the notion of defilement might have played in discrimination against the *Burakumin* community we have to look at the history of Japan in order to understand how it has gradually become rooted in beliefs over the course of centuries. Death, blood, childbirth, disease, meat consumption and fire had been considered since the days of ancient Japan to be “impure things” that had been detested by the gods and could spread defilement. There was also a fear that contact with this defilement could cause something bad to happen, such as illness or death. In the first half of the 3rd century, when a man died, the mourning period lasted for ten days, during which relatives were not allowed to eat meat. After the funeral, all family members would perform ablutions, and it was likely these customs that later led to the taboo surrounding meat consumption and the belief that death could defile. It was during the Heian period (794-1185), however, that the concept of defilement would be incorporated into the law. Historians consider this to be the period during which discrimination based on the idea of defilement started to gain ground. The *Engishiki*—a Japanese compendium of laws that came into force in 967—, for example, outlines those situations in which one must keep a distance after being in a defiled situation such as the death of a man, childbirth, the death or birth of six specific animals and meat consumption. According to existing research into the history of the *buraku*, these sets of regulations have undoubtedly reinforced discrimination not only against certain professionals such as butchers and leather craftsmen but also against women and funeral home employees—all jobs performed by the *Eta* people. This same compendium stipulated that fake Buddhist monks and butchers were not allowed to live initially to the south of and later in the areas surrounding certain temples. Each temple enacted a series of prohibitions aimed at keeping any defilement as far away as possible from the temple itself and its surroundings. These rules regarding defilement were undoubtedly influenced by an esoteric Buddhist sutra when Buddhist writings were first introduced to Japan. This sutra considered looking at a corpse, or witnessing a woman or six specific animals giving birth, to be an impure act. Furthermore, a Mahayana Buddhist sutra introduced to Japan featured the Lotus sutra advocating that monks stay away from an ancient Indian sub-caste (*Chandāla*), as well as animal farmers, hunters and fishermen. Indeed, the sacred books of Mahayana Buddhism often contain passages where the *Chandāla*, butchers and meat-eaters are

⁵This section is based on the book *Nyūmon hisabetsu buraku no rekishi* (‘Introduction to the History of Discriminated Buraku’) by Teraki Nobuaki and Kurokawa Midori, Osaka, Kaihō Shuppansha, 2016, pp.31-37.

considered to be evil beings. These writings first spread among the privileged classes and intellectuals before reaching the common people in the latter half of the Heian period, and it is most certainly the combination of these various influences that has reinforced discrimination against butchers and leather craftsmen. Discrimination against the *buraku* and its inhabitants is therefore partly linked to professional discrimination against certain trades. Historians have supposed that it was in the 10th century that butchers and leather craftsmen began to be excluded and discriminated against based on the notion of defilement and the discriminatory teachings of Mahayana Buddhism. They assume that it was around the 13th century, and notably in Kyoto, that contact between these two trades and other Japanese citizens gradually ceased. That said, not all parts of Japan have been affected by the same influences. In pre-modern times, for example, there was no taboo surrounding meat consumption in Hokkaido or the Ryukyu Islands, suggesting that butchers and leather craftsmen in these parts were perhaps not discriminated against. In areas where hunting was one of the primary activities, and those that have not been influenced by the discriminatory teachings of Mahayana Buddhism or the prohibitions imposed by temples, discrimination against these professions is still rare.

In pre-modern society, however, since defilement was believed to be contagious, it has led to various forms of avoidance behaviour. Access to holy places, for example, was denied to individuals considered to be defiled, and eating or sharing water or fire with them was to be avoided. There is no longer any evidence of this opposition between the pure and the impure among the younger generation,⁶ but we will see that discrimination has simply taken on a number of new forms.

Biological racism and discrimination against the *Burakumin*

Biological racism, which has resulted in the extermination and exploitation of minority groups the world over, including European Jews and African Americans, is one of the reasons for the exclusion of *buraku* inhabitants. Historian Kurokawa Midori⁷ has highlighted the racist nature of this discrimination in a number of her works and

⁶Nobuaki, T. and Michihiko, N., *Buraku mondairon e no shōtai : shiryō to kaisetsu* ('Invitation to Join the Discussion on the Issue of the Buraku: Documents and Explanations'), Osaka, Kaihō Shuppansha, 2006, p.60.

⁷We are referring here to Kurokawa Midori's '*Jinshu shugi to buraku sabetsu*' ('Racism and Discrimination Against the *Buraku*'), in Yasuko, T., *Jinshu gainen no fuhensei o tou* ('Universality of the Concept of Race in Question'), Kyoto, Jinbunshoin, 2005.

attempted to trace the historical and scientific facts that fuelled the idea that the *Burakumin* belonged to a different race than other Japanese people. She explains that it was with the emergence of modern anthropology—which became more internationalised in the late 19th century—and the founding of the Tokyo Anthropological Society in 1884 that Japanese anthropologists attempted to provide scientific evidence to demonstrate that the *Burakumin* were racially different (p.281). Indeed, several publications by renowned anthropologists defined the *Eta* as being biologically different, and painstaking studies were performed on certain parts of their bodies to highlight a number of physical characteristics that could differentiate them from other Japanese people. These results were widely reported in the press at the time (p.283), and while the ‘status system’ was abolished by Meiji's government in 1871, the notion of race gradually replaced the idea of defilement (p.281). While anthropological knowledge has contributed to the racialisation of the *Burakumin* people, other influences have reinforced their ‘otherisation’. In one article, for example, historian Sekiguchi Hiroshi⁸ explains how knowledge imported from the West shaped people's perceptions of the *buraku* and of those classes that were considered to be inferior in the early 20th century. Following the restoration of Meiji in 1868, the government at the time, which was seeking to adopt a more modern approach, introduced sciences such as criminology and psychiatry from the West in an attempt to understand those that were seen as being socially deviant (p.108-109). These new sciences were expected to offer measures and explanations for understanding crime, poverty, perversion and madness (p.106). Psychiatrist Benedict Augustin Morel's (1809-1873) theory of degeneration and the born-criminal theory developed by Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), an Italian doctor considered to be the founder of criminal anthropology, would consequently be introduced to and disseminated within Japan. The former explained that degeneration was a pathological deviation of the normal human type (p.110) that, according to Benedict Augustin Morel, was triggered by alcohol addition, drugs, poverty or unhealthy working conditions (p.110). Cesare Lombroso's theory, meanwhile, maintained that criminality and deviance were innate characteristics, meaning that criminals could notably be distinguished by anatomical features. Both theories were applied to people of the *buraku* in the early 20th century (p.115). Furthermore, the writings of one of the intellectuals of the time, Kagawa Toyohiko (1888-1960), a Christian pastor, writer and reformer of society, contained discriminatory and racialising comments whereby he described them as being of an

⁸Hiroshi, S., ‘Kagawa toyohiko no shakaijigyō to kagakuteki jinshu shugi’ (‘Kagawa Toyohiko's Social Work and Scientific Racism’), in Yasuko, T. and Toru, S., *Jinshu shinwa o kaitaisuru*, (‘Deconstructing the Myth of Race’), Tokyo, Daigaku Shuppan-Kai, 2016, Vol. 2.

inferior race whose behaviour was driven by their animal instinct (p.128) and as “a degenerate race living among the Japanese people” (p.122).

In listing the physical and psychological characteristics of the *Burakumin* in his 1915 book entitled *Recherches sur la psychologie du pauvre* ('Research into the Psychology of the Poor'), he claimed that these differences stemmed from a form of racial distinction.

“There are many fat people among them who are generally larger than ordinary Japanese people, and there are, of course, things that differentiate them from other Japanese citizens in terms of their feelings—aggression, insensitivity, solidarity, jealousy... could this all stem solely from their social condition?” (p.121)

He also maintains that their criminality is inborn:

“What can we say about their criminal tendencies? [...] Generally speaking, we cannot deny the fact that the criminal race descends from a kind of family tradition. No-one can deny the idea that they are a criminal race belonging to the Japanese Empire”.⁹

It wasn't until 1919 that historian Kita Sadakichi refuted the idea that the *Burakumin* were different from other Japanese people in an article on the origins of the *Eta* population (Kurokawa, p.289). A 1950 UNESCO report again rejected this belief, though it is still held in Japanese society today, and the fear of mixing one's blood with that of a *Burakumin* for fear of defiling one's line of descent is still cited by non-*Burakumin* members of society as justification for refusing to marry them. Although cultural racism has been shown to have a greater influence in the countries of the Global North, non-*Burakumin* members of society still cite biological racism as justification for excluding the *Burakumin* population, as shown in the following extract:

“- The problem lies in the blood. If we mix our blood with their blood [the blood of the *Burakumin*], then our race unfortunately changes, because they are of a different race. Their blood is strong”.

- Who told you that?

“Our friends and family [...], because Japan is a country with a great respect for lineage. The Japanese respect lineage. That is why even if we [the Japanese] are considering marrying a partner, the parents and relatives will always come into it. They will look into the person's lineage, and the wrong lineage must be avoided at all costs” - (Non-*Burakumin* male, aged 75)

⁹Nobuyuki, K., '*Kagawa Toyohiko no hisabetsu buraku ron*' ('Kagawa Toyohiko's Theory of the Discriminated Buraku'), (Journal) Liberation of the Buraku from Hyōgo, 1988, p.13.

The fear of mixing one's blood with that of a member of the *Burakumin* community led to the creation of the *Chimei sōkan*—a series of lists of *buraku* locations produced for the purposes of identifying their inhabitants. The existence of these lists was discovered in 1975 and they were consequently purchased by 223 companies.¹⁰ These lists include the names of 5,300 *buraku* around the country, as well as their locations, the number of dwellings they comprised and the main occupations of their inhabitants (p.253-254). The person responsible for the first edition of these lists, who opened an intelligence agency in the late 1960s, admitted that 99% of client requests were based on the concern on the part of non-*Burakumin* people about mixing their blood with that of someone living in a *buraku* (p.254). The problem that these lists represent has not been resolved; they are still sold and circulated online and the regulations introduced to limit their circulation are considered by the campaigners from the Buraku Liberation League to be insufficient (p.261). In this respect, sociologist Saito Naoko explains that “identity investigations” carried out by intelligence agencies and private detectives in Japan can still be big business today,¹¹ with such investigations typically performed prior to weddings, when an individual wants to confirm their partner's nationality and where they were born, among other things (p.9). A growing number of local authorities have been adopting a system whereby the person in question is systematically informed every time an extract from a civil status record or other official document concerning them is issued to a third party in recent years with a view to preventing people from obtaining such documents by fraudulent means (p.9).

Discrimination in marriage

Our investigation showed that, whilst the rate of intermarriage between members of the two groups has been steadily increasing since the post-war¹² period, there is still an element of discrimination at the time of marriage. Many young

¹⁰Yasuko, T., ‘*Sai to sabetsu no (fu) kashika o megutte*’ (‘On the (In)Visibility of Differences and Discrimination’), in Ayako, S. and Yasuko, T. (eds.), *Jinshu shinwa o kaitaisuru* (‘Deconstructing the Myth of Race’), Tokyo, University of Tokyo University Press, Vol. 1, 2016, p.253-254.

¹¹Naoko, S., *Kekkon sabetsu no shakaigaku* (‘Sociology of Discrimination in Marriage’), Tokyo, Keisō Shobō, 2017, p.9.

¹²Ryūshi, U., ‘*Tsūkon to buraku sabetsu*’ (‘Intermarriage and Discrimination Against the Buraku’), in *Kekkon sabetsu no genjō to keihatsu e no shisa* (‘Discrimination in Marriage Today and Suggestions for Education’), Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute, Osaka, 2004, p.9.

Burakumin face difficulties at this stage in their lives and this phenomenon is made invisible by the silence of those concerned. They notably face the dilemma of hiding their 'identity' from their partner or indeed revealing it to them, and this need to confess is something that not only the inhabitants of the *buraku* experience but also those belonging to sexual minorities, one of the defining features of which is that they are invisible. The analogy between the two groups is one that is frequently drawn since 'revealing' the fact that one belongs to the *Burakumin* community is akin to the need for individuals hiding their homosexuality to come out. The following excerpt highlights the complexity of this situation as told by a young *Burakumin* woman who had to end plans for her first marriage after an eight-month relationship as a result of irreversible opposition on the part of her in-laws. She is now dealing with this rejection for the second time as her new partner's relatives refuse to consent to the marriage.

"I think that getting into a relationship and openly revealing that you were born in a *buraku* is a very difficult thing to do and involves certain risks. Once they [non-*Burakumin* individuals] have preconceived ideas about the *buraku*, it's very difficult to get away from them because the image they have will certainly not be a positive one. Hiding the fact that you belong to the *Burakumin* community is not a nice thing to have to do and is even unnatural, but revealing this fact means taking a very big risk where you, your partner and your respective families are concerned. It's a tough choice" – (Female graduate of a vocational college, healthcare assistant, aged 27, experience dating back to 2015, currently being discriminated against by the family of her new partner)

The fight to get the in-laws to consent to the marriage can be a long and psychologically challenging one, with the potential psychological effects of such discrimination including depression, withdrawal for an undetermined period of time, medical leave from work and even suicide. Furthermore, research by Japanese¹³ sociologists has revealed that being a member of the *Burakumin* community can continue to be a problem for the couple even after the marriage. The high number of *Burakumin* women in single-parent situations is believed to be indirectly linked to the discrimination that such women experience. The in-laws may also impose certain conditions and various other forms of psychological pressure on the *Burakumin* partner to keep their circumstances a secret from other family members and any children the couple might have. If we compare the life stories of members of this minority group thirty years apart, we see that identical situations have occurred repeatedly over the years.

¹³ See Naoko, S., *op.cit.*, p.201.

The Buraku Liberation League: a source of controversy

The Buraku Liberation League, which was founded in 1922 under the name *Suiheisha* and took its current name in 1955, has set itself the task of completely liberating the *Burakumin* people from the discrimination they suffer within society. Since it was founded, the League has implemented a control strategy known as *kyūdan tōsō* ('accusatory struggles') in Japanese and consisting of summoning and interviewing individuals who have committed a discriminatory act. As far as the movement is concerned, such struggles are defined as a legitimate right of defence introduced to compensate for the insufficient legal measures put in place to help victims of discrimination.¹⁴ That said, our investigation revealed that this process gave non-*Burakumin* people the impression of a violent group, and the poor perception of the Liberation League has been further aggravated by a case of corruption that resulted in one of the League's leaders being arrested for fraud and extortion in 2006, having been accused of using large sums of money initially earmarked for the renovation of assimilation areas. Society's distrust of the *Buraku* Liberation League, which is seen as a violent and profiteering group, is reflected in comments made by both *Burakumin* and non-*Burakumin* individuals alike:

"The Liberation League of the 1970s was too violent, and because the activists were talking like *yakuzas* and saying things like "You, you discriminate!", or "Apologise and bow down!", no-one was prepared to tackle the problem. The Liberation League scares people" – (activist's daughter in her 30s, Osaka city)

"From a human rights perspective, discrimination is not good, but I think that this Liberation League that's attempting to deal with the problem of assimilation is a movement that has done some awful things in the past. They used the word 'discrimination', which is used in the legal sphere to refer to assimilation measures, and were violent towards organisations and individuals who did not share their views. They insulted them and made accusations against them (making people kneel before them and harassing them psychologically until late into the night) while at the same time spreading fear and forcing people to obey them. Renovated houses were quickly built in those areas affected by the movement's reign of violence and the government introduced incredibly low rent opportunities on these properties ten years ago. The League's main focal point has become the department responsible for housing and employment, which does exactly as the League tells it to out of fear, with a view to getting the necessary work done and employing members of the *Burakumin* community in local council roles. From a financial perspective, the city incurred significant expenses and the finance department found itself in difficulty. Given that they favour them [the *Burakumin*],

¹⁴ *Buraku* Liberation League website (<http://www.bll.gr.jp/siryositu/s-sbet-nanika.html>), accessed in July 2019.

it was inevitable that the term ‘reverse discrimination’ would start to be bandied about the neighbourhood [...]. The fact that I’m aware of this means that I still feel a certain mistrust towards the *Burakumin* issue and I cannot condone what they have done” – (Non-*Burakumin* man, aged 70, Amagasaki city)

This violence on the part of the League is something that it partially recognises, does not claim responsibility for and sees as ‘inevitable’, as explained on its website,¹⁵ but it is not the principle on which the movement is based, as may have been the case with the Black Panther Party (BPP) in the United States. In addition to its poor image, the organisation faces difficulties in uniting the younger generation since the discrimination is less visible now than it used to be.¹⁶ The *Burakumin* people describe this disengagement on the part of young people in terms of a “weakened” movement that is “less appealing”, one in which “young people no longer show any interest” and that “only involves elderly people”.

Conclusion

The otherisation process that the *Burakumin* have undergone has been built throughout Japan’s history on the basis of religious prohibitions and later based on essentialist views that still persists to this day. The poor perception that people have of the League, along with ignorance and false beliefs, such as the idea that intermarriages are common among the *Burakumin* people, only reinforces this mechanism of exclusion, and whilst stigmatisation and discrimination may be insidious, they do have a direct impact on the lives of the *Burakumin* community in terms of work and education since these areas are characterised by job instability and low levels of education among their inhabitants. That said, no survey has been conducted of *Burakumin* individuals living outside of the assimilation areas due to the difficulty of locating such individuals.

Their invisibility means that young members of the *Burakumin* community can repeatedly hear comments in the workplace that stigmatise and belittle them as members of the minority group, but in light of the poor legal measures put in place to condemn such comments, the majority choose to remain silent, meaning that prejudice is still rife in all aspects of daily life and indeed within the family environment. The

¹⁵*Idem*.

¹⁶ Buraku Liberation League website (<http://www.bll.gr.jp/info/news2018/news20180219.html>), accessed in July 2019.

lack of interaction with individuals with differing opinions and who are bound by the taboo surrounding this issue is also a barrier to curing these prejudices. Furthermore, there is a great deal of resentment among the non-*Burakumin* population surveyed with regards to the positive discrimination measures that the *Burakumin* people have benefited from, which raises the issue of the effect that the affirmative action policy is having, since similar reactions have been observed in India “against the Dalit people, who have been accused of taking unfair advantage of the reservation system”.¹⁷ Furthermore, the debate is currently focused on the future of this segment of the population given that there are two opposing trends within this minority group, namely those who want to keep quiet about their background until it is no longer an issue and those who want to perpetuate it by considering it an important part of their identity.

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¹⁷Jaffrelot, C. and Naudet, J., *Justifier l'ordre social* ('Justifying Social Order'), Paris, Puf/La Vie des Idées, 2013, p.93.

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