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What is a Burakumin today?

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1. Introduction: definitions

- 1 In Japan, the word Burakumin refers to a member of an invisible, historically racialized minority.¹ Because of the blurred contours of this ascription, the definition of a Burakumin has been the subject of debate for several years now and is a challenge for all researchers working on the subject. While compiling my research corpus, which is based on nearly one hundred semi-structured interviews conducted between 2011 and 2018,² I questioned the criteria used to distinguish a Burakumin from someone who is not.
- 2 From a linguistic point of view, a literal English translation of the word Burakumin (部落民) would be “the people (-*min* 民) of the hamlets” (*buraku* 部落). The word *buraku* has two meanings; it can be used in a neutral sense to refer to a village or hamlet (Kobayakawa 2020: 2, Uchida, Tsumaki and Saito 2017: 5). But it also refers to places that are subject to discrimination, in which case it is a condensed form of “discriminated buraku” (*hisabetsu buraku* 被差別部落) (Uchida, Tsumaki and Saito 2017: 5). Originally, the term Burakumin was used for people who were believed to have a genealogical link with the discriminated status of Senmin (賤民), “lower-class people” who lived in these areas in premodern Japan (Ishimoto 2006: 172-173).
- 3 Today, many people believe that the places where Eta (穢多) and Hinin (非人) (two categories of Senmin) lived correspond to the present-day buraku districts. Some evidence has been found to confirm this [...]. However, many buraku areas are not related to them. Although the terms Eta and Hinin are often used together,³ these two groups did not live alongside each other. The Eta mainly worked in farming, which meant that they lived in rural areas. They were also known to work with leather, bamboo, and to manufacture sandals and drums. As for the Hinin, they were beggars. The origins of buraku districts are varied and cannot all be traced to a pre-modern

Japanese status. Many historical facts remain to be uncovered (the explanations in this paragraph were drawn from Ishimoto 2017: 20-21).

- 4 In August 1871, the Japanese government issued an “Emancipation Edict” (*kaihô rei* 解放令) that aimed at ending the use of Senmin names and guaranteed their equality with other Japanese (Ishimoto 2017: 22). But the negative perception against people of this status has persisted (Ishimoto 2017: 22) as this article will show.

1.1. A historically racialized group

- 5 Even after the Emancipation Edict of 1871, the tendency to otherize the Eta continued, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, cases of divorce due to the discovery of the buraku origin of one of the partners would still shake society (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 161). The novel *The Broken Commandment* (1974 [1906]) (*Hakai* 破戒) written in 1906 by Shimazaki Tôson 島崎藤村 (1872-1943) sheds some light on the discrimination and otherizing of the Burakumin that was still present at that time. The main character, Segawa Uchimatsu (瀬川丑松

), an elementary school teacher, hides his buraku origins. One of his friends and his colleagues allude to imaginary criteria for identifying Eta, such as skin color or a particular smell (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 164-165).

It should be noted that these false beliefs in physical distinctions, such as animalization, a physical blemish, a bad smell, etc., have been held against various minority groups throughout history (Schaub and Sebastiani 2021: 101-102). In her book *L'idéologie raciste*

[Racist Ideology], Colette Guillaumin devotes a section to characteristics commonly ascribed to minorities and explains that while each type of racism is specific, shared traits can be identified such as the particularism ascribed to them by the majority group (Guillaumin 1972: 86-87). These specific features contribute to a process of otherization and are often based on imaginary physical characteristics.

- 6 Returning to the reform policies implemented by the Japanese State, at the turn of the century, the Mie prefecture carried out a survey aimed at introducing a policy for renovating buraku districts. It was compiled in a 1907 report entitled “Overview of Renovations to Special-Race Buraku” (*Tokushu buraku kaizen no kôgai* 特種部落改善の梗概) (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 168). The policy’s lack of effectiveness was [wrongly] explained by the laziness and moral weaknesses of the buraku residents (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 168)⁵ and contributed to the idea that they were racially different (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 168-169). The perception that they belonged to a different race shows that they were not considered “normal” people (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 169). Reformers viewed them as intellectually inferior beings, more barbaric and cruel than “ordinary” Japanese, and distinguished by physiological differences (see for reference the writings of Tomeoka Kôsuke 留岡幸助 (1864-1934) and Kagawa Toyohiko 賀川豊彦 (1888-1960) cited in Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 171-172).
- 7 The use of the terms “special-race buraku” (*tokushu buraku* 特種部落) in the title of the 1907 report, shows that the idea that the Burakumin might have a racially different origin was gaining ground in society (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 169). It was not until 1919 that historian Kita Sadakichi (喜田貞吉 1871-1939) proved this belief wrong

(Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 193). In 1919, he published an article in the magazine *Minzoku to rekishi* 民族と歴史 (*Ethnicity and History*), entitled “Thoughts on the origin of the Eta” (*Eta genryûkô* エタ源流考) in which he refutes the idea of a distinction based on the Eta’s ethnicity. He writes: “The people previously called ‘Eta’ have nothing to ethnically distinguish them from the people we now refer to as Japanese”⁶ (Kita 1982: 91). That same year, he refuted the idea that Burakumin have different racial origins.⁷ However, a 1993 nationwide survey shows that 9.9% of the population still believes in this idea (*Sômuchô* 総務庁 General Affairs Agency, 1993). As sociologist Noguchi Michihiko rightly points out, “[today], even if there is no evidence that they [Burakumin] are biologically and hereditarily different, the illusion of a difference seems to remain”⁸ (Teraki and Noguchi 2006: 60). In the workplace, racist jokes that continue to biologize the Burakumin still sometimes circulate. During my study, a Burakumin woman, for example, told me about the comments passing as jokes heard by her husband, such as: “This man has green [Eta] blood running through his veins” (F., Burakumin, 35 years old, self-employed).

- 8 Genealogy, and thus biological criteria, are used to continue to ostracize the Burakumin and discriminate against them, but this is only one of the reasons why this category of individuals continues to be sidelined. Historically, the idea of defilement has played a predominant role in Japanese society and in Burakumin discrimination (see the work of Jean-François Sabouret 1983). While less central in contemporary society, when it resurfaces, it is alluded to indirectly. Class racism has also been mentioned by non-Burakumin as a disqualifying factor among other justifications. Another fear expressed is of being contaminated by the stigma of bringing a Burakumin into the family, and thus of being disadvantaged as well. The fear of having to deal with the Buraku Liberation League in the event of a conflict with a Burakumin is a final argument put forward by non-Burakumin who are also negatively prejudiced against the League portrayed as a profiteering and violent group. The Burakumin are thus the subject of numerous negative stereotypes regarding their supposedly violent temper, their dependance on welfare, their poverty, poor education (their way of speaking is considered vulgar), the dangerousness of buraku districts, and even their tainted blood.

1.2. Blurred borders: a category with shifting boundaries

- 9 It is commonly accepted in research on the buraku issue in Japan, that the boundaries which initially separated Burakumin from non-Burakumin are blurred (Fujita 1997, Noguchi 2000, Okuda 2008, Ishimoto 2017). This makes the definition of the terms “buraku” and “Burakumin” extremely nebulous. The impossibility of defining what a Burakumin is today can be explained by multiple factors linked to societal changes. One of the factors mentioned by respondents is the growing number of marriages between Burakumin and non-Burakumin over the years (Noguchi 2000: 27, Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 274). According to the most recent data, the percentage of intermarriages has increased as follows: 8.2% in 1951, 11.8% in 1963, 30.3% in 1985, and 36.6% in 1993 (Suginohara 1995: 20). A second aspect that has contributed to blur the boundaries of this category is the large number of people moving in and out of these districts (Noguchi 2000: 27, Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 274).
- 10 In a major reference work published in 2000 (*Buraku mondai no paradaimu tenkan* 部落問題のバラダイム転換) which can be translated into English as “Paradigm shift

regarding the buraku problem,” the sociologist Noguchi M. reflects on the need to broaden the definition of a Burakumin (Noguchi 2000: 16). According to him, a Burakumin is a person considered as such who has been discriminated against, or who is highly likely of being discriminated against⁹ (Noguchi 2000: 16, 2001a: 944-945). This “constructivist” definition does not include geographical or genealogical elements (Noguchi 2000: 17) and is now widely accepted by Japanese researchers in this field.

- 11 As for the Burakumin respondents interviewed for my thesis, when they introduced me through a “snowball procedure” to other individuals, they systematically referred me to individuals who had one Burakumin parent, with no distinction between maternal or paternal ancestry. One of the two parents had necessarily been born or had lived in a buraku district. This shows the prevalence of the concept of territory. The respondents had a strong notion of who the Burakumin were.
- 12 Nevertheless, the concept remains subjective and variable for Burakumin and non-Burakumin alike depending on the buraku community and the city. According to sociologist Ishimoto Kiyohide (personal communication), people make a distinction between Burakumin who have at least one Burakumin relative and those who do not have any, but who live in a buraku district and recognize themselves as such. Activists of the Buraku Liberation League had divergent opinions. In Kyoto, people tend to be considered Burakumin if they live in a buraku district even if their parents are not Burakumin, while in Osaka, both conditions must be met.

2. The arbitrariness and ambiguity of the criteria

- 13 As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the definition of a buraku district is also vague and imprecise. It is commonly defined as “a place that has long been regarded as such by common sense and still is”¹⁰ (Harada Tomohiko quoted in Ishimoto 2017: 20). Because of the urban diversity of these areas, they cannot be assimilated to ghettos. Burakumin are not segregated within buraku neighborhoods where they live apart from the majority group. However, even if there is an appearance of urban diversity on the surface, this does not mean that discrimination has disappeared (Noguchi 2001b: 358), as confirmed by the study of a neighborhood where Burakumin and non-Burakumin live side by side. Tensions remain between residents, and minority groups generally stay hidden.
- 14 Given the taboo that surrounds the issue, stigmatizing comments are made out of the Burakumin’s hearing. For example, cab drivers may tell customers to avoid buraku districts for safety reasons. At the end of the study, it was confirmed by the qualitative and quantitative data collected that prejudice circulates widely within the confines of the family sphere. Families play a major role in perpetuating the depreciatory image of these neighborhoods, and non-Burakumin parents often warn their children from an early age to avoid discriminated areas.
- 15 Several Japanese opinion surveys and sociological studies have shown the arbitrary nature of the reasons people discriminate against the Burakumin (Noguchi 2000, Okuda 2008, Ishimoto 2017, Saito 2017).
- 16 The words of this young Burakumin¹¹ interviewed illustrate how difficult it is to define this shifting category:

There isn't a definition of a Burakumin. Is a Burakumin defined by blood ties or by the place where he lives? And then, if he leaves the place where he lives, which is a buraku, he's no longer a Burakumin. And yet, he is a Burakumin [...]. This is the most difficult aspect of the problem. For example, in the case of Jews, you become a Jew through blood ties, don't you? In the case of the Burakumin, what's complicated is that we don't know whether it's based on the place where the person lives or on blood ties, it's very vague [...]. If I ask myself right now if I'm Burakumin, I answer yes. And the people who come to live in the buraku are probably not Burakumin. What criteria do we use to decide? There's nothing to help us decide [...].

(Male nurse, 32 years old)

- 17 The ambiguity of the term comes from the fact that the individuals who are identified as such cannot be the ones to decide how to define themselves. The following comments from a respondent illustrate this point:

Some people base their definition of Burakumin on blood ties, others base it on the place where they live. In the end, it's the people who discriminate who decide [...]. I feel like we can't really decide whether it's one or the other. (Employee working in a buraku, 32 years old)

- 18 The ambiguity of the criteria that define the potentially discriminated person seems to be one of the main characteristics of this discrimination and is what distinguishes it from other inequalities of treatment (Okuda 2008: 39). From the responses to the two human rights opinion surveys conducted in 2009 in the city of Iga and in 2010 in the Osaka prefecture, we observe that there are multiple criteria for designating someone as a Burakumin (Uchida, Tsumaki and Saito 2017: 10). In answer to the question as to which elements are used to judge whether an individual originates from a *dōwa* (同和) [meaning a renovated buraku], most people surveyed answered that they based their judgement on the place of residence, the legal residence, the place of birth, or the parents' or grandparents' address (Uchida, Tsumaki and Saito 2017: 10). The results of these surveys show that the territory remains a decisive criterion.
- 19 As long as a link remains between the individual and an area that is considered a buraku, the stigma is associated with this person (Okuda 2008: 41). Moreover, this connection is not limited to the individual alone but can be determined by tracing a link between the land and the parents and grandparents (Okuda 2008: 41). A territory thus carries a stigma, in the same way as a phenotype, religion or culture.
- 20 Another respondent clearly explained that this discrimination was unique in that it remained linked to the land, to the territory:
- The question is why such a serious discrimination continues to this day. It's a discrimination based on a territory, that is quite deeply rooted.
(H., Burakumin, 76 years old, retired)
- 21 In the next section, we examine the effects of these circumstances on the life of the individuals affected by them and the problems that arise from them.

3. The process of passing: when hiding remains the norm

- 22 The field investigation of Burakumin and non-Burakumin revealed that not all Burakumin suffer from discrimination. Some of them mentioned that their condition had improved. This section, however, focuses on those whose life trajectory is still affected by stigmatization and discrimination.

- 23 Our study raised an issue that is often addressed in buraku studies in Japan, which is whether to “hide” or “reveal” the location of buraku districts and whether a buraku origin should be hidden or revealed. When thinking about these questions, the concept of “passing” provides an interesting perspective for investigating the experience of Burakumin. Although accounts of passing may be considered “almost always marginal and improbable” (Bosa, Pagis and Trépied 2019: 6), in the case of Burakumin, this seems instead to be the norm and seems to be encouraged by assimilationist societal contact. Passing becomes possible when the stigma is not visible. Factors such as moving the Burakumin outside buraku districts, introducing urban diversity in these areas and geographical mobility have made it more possible over time to pass as non-Burakumin.
- 24 This blurring of the boundaries between non-Burakumins and Burakumins has generated anxiety among the majority population, who have been deploying a variety of means to identify Burakumins. Words such as “hunt” or “stalk” are appropriate in this case, and the dissemination on the Internet of lists of Burakumin names has been likened to practices of denunciation. This is often done anonymously, with no real possibility of appeal.
- 25 Stories of “forced outings” have also been reported after in-laws carried out identity investigations. Many of our respondents agreed that unlike in the 1960s, discrimination, discriminatory language, and stigmatization were expressed in covert ways. The only way out was sometimes to pass as non-Burakumin and live in secrecy. In the excerpt below, a Burakumin man whose family members are married to people from outside the buraku community, explains their attitude toward their partner:
- Among my brothers and sisters, I’m the only one to take part in the liberation movement [the League]. The others don’t participate. Or rather, they’re not active in the movement.
 - They don’t want to be too involved?
 - When they got married, none of the three told their partner: “I am buraku.”
 - Are they all hiding it?
 - They’re hiding it [...] They’re still hiding it today. They haven’t mentioned it.
 - Why not? Did they consider that it wasn’t necessary to mention it?
 - Since they aren’t involved in the movement, they don’t feel the need to mention it. But they know that anti-buraku discrimination is a reality. They know whether it’s a good thing to mention it or not. For example, if they mention it, maybe people might look at them in a certain way, or it might create tensions and [they’d hear] “[You], as a buraku person, I wouldn’t have married you.” We don’t know [what might happen].
- (H., Burakumin, 51 years old, civil servant, involved in the League’s activities)
- 26 There are still some grey areas in the way the Burakumin live this double life, and our knowledge in this respect is still limited. Do they sneak off to see friends and family in the buraku? Are family ties completely broken? It is also difficult to quantify this phenomenon. It is not either an easy task to “reveal” a buraku origin. A lot of fear is attached to it as explained by this woman:
- Why did you never get married? [With your partner].
 - I was afraid he’d find out I was from a buraku. I didn’t say anything.
 - Was your partner prejudiced against people originating from a buraku?
 - Maybe he didn’t care that much, but I was afraid. [...] I couldn’t mention it. I’ve never been able to mention it.
- (F., Burakumin, 50 years old, separated, housekeeper)

- 27 Marriage is not the only context in which buraku origins are hidden, as this respondent explains:

When I was in high school, some girls in my class were convinced that you had to hide the fact that you came from a buraku district.

(H., Burakumin, 23 years old, employed by a newspaper printing company)

- 28 The interview excerpts above describe this inner tension between “hiding” or “revealing” a buraku origin. The next section deals with the revelation of a person’s buraku origin in the press without their knowledge. It shows that some newspapers have not yet fully grasped how to deal with this issue.

4. Incident with the weekly magazine *Asahi* (*Shûkan asahi* 週刊朝日)

- 29 This section looks at an incident that occurred when Hashimoto Tôru (橋下徹), the former mayor of Osaka, was targeted by a discriminatory article published about him in October 26, 2012 issue (on sale from October 16), in the weekly magazine *Asahi*. As can be seen in the image below, a close-up of the mayor’s face appears on the cover with the following title: (*Hashimoto Tôru no DNA o sakanobori honshô o aburidasu*) 「橋下徹のDNAをさかのぼり本性をあぶり出す」 which means: “Hashimoto Torû’s true nature is revealed [here] by a DNA search” and alludes to his buraku origins.



The offending magazine cover. Image taken from The Osaka Prefectural Liberation League website (*Buraku kaihô dômei ôsakafu rengôkai* 部落解放同盟大阪府連合会), hrn.gr.jp/news/255/, news feed of October 24, 2012.

- 30 An apology was published by the weekly magazine following protests from the League and other sources (*Buraku kaihô* 2013: 13). The authors of the article were criticized for encouraging, on a national scale, discrimination and prejudice against people originating from buraku districts but also for causing widespread unrest notably among those who have moved out of discriminated areas (*Buraku kaihô* 2013: 14-15). Burakumin advocates spoke out, explaining that many members of this minority continue to live in hiding or outside buraku areas (Akai 2013: 17-18). The article caused much anxiety and fear among them, but also among those who originate from the discriminated Hashimoto area (Akai 2013: 23). The issue at stake was the loss of consideration for human rights in the press due to a lack of knowledge regarding the buraku question (*Buraku kaihô* 2013: 15). The way Hashimoto Tôru was targeted in this case is part of a process of otherization that aims to reinforce an imaginary boundary

between Burakumin and non-Burakumin. It shows how the magazine fuels this tension and raises the question of the role of the press in maintaining this division. The magazine seemed to have used a sensationalist tone to deliberately stir up feelings of discrimination against buraku communities with the objective of boosting its sales (Akai 2013: 17). According to the results of my study among non-Burakumin, this incident epitomizes the discriminatory tone that persists within society. In this case, prejudice, genealogy and essentialization are intertwined.

- 31 Insofar as ascription to the Burakumin is invisible, the act of “revealing” it without the person’s knowledge is a discrimination in itself (Akai 2013: 21). Journalists went so far as to check the names of Hashimoto’s grandfather and great-grandfather (Akai 2013: 25). In the article, the root of Hashimoto’s alleged intolerant and difficult personality was claimed to be linked to his father’s buraku origin, which shows how pervasive hereditary explanations can be (Osaka Prefectural Liberation League website, 2012). This is not the first time this type of association has been made.
- 32 Several examples show that public opinion often [wrongly] suspects buraku people in criminal cases, as in the case of the murders of Kobe schoolchildren or the Sayama incident, which is a typical example (Ôi’s comments in Aoki and Kadôka 2013: 37). The idea of a link between crime and a buraku origin could be explained by the negative image associated with buraku areas, which has been spreading within society (Kadôka’s comments in Aoki and Kadôka 2013: 37). The criminalization of minorities is a phenomenon that is far from unique to Japan.
- 33 Conversely, the choice to openly identify buraku areas, as has sometimes been done, is not without its problems. This standpoint is addressed in the next section, which examines the trial that opposed Tottori Loop and the Liberation League.

5. The Buraku Liberation League: making the invisible visible

- 34 In the 1920s, Burakumin were urged to move abroad or to Hokkaidô (in northern Japan) on the pretext that discrimination was non-existent there and they would be able to find work (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 198).
- 35 It was in this hostile context that, on March 3, 1922, an extensive movement to defend the rights of the Burakumin was created: the National Suiheisha society (*Zenkoku Suiheisha* 全国水平社), “the national society of levelers.” Suiheisha archives explain that the founders were encouraged by resistance movements after the First World War such as Gandhi’s Swadeshi movement in India, Sinn Féin in Ireland and other independence movements in Africa (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 199). Drawing on their personal experience of discrimination, the founders recognized the need to build solidarity to oppose it (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 200). The Suiheisha declaration includes the following: “Special Burakumin scattered all over the country, let’s unite!”¹² And also: “The time has come to be proud of being Eta”¹³ (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 202). The emphasis on the Eta group in this statement is explained by the fact that the liberation movement was led mainly by buraku people who descended from members of Eta villages (Ishimoto 2017: 60).
- 36 This newfound pride may have been sufficient to attract the Burakumin who until then belittled themselves because they believed that the discrimination they suffered was

their fault (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 202). With the movement's support, Burakumin started to challenge discrimination in various ways in different parts of the country (Teraki and Kurokawa 2016: 204-205).

- 37 In 1955, the Suiheisha society was renamed the “Buraku Liberation League” (*Buraku kaihô dômei* 部落解放同盟) and in that post-war period, it was able to secure many advances. These were due in part to the positive discrimination measures implemented over a 33-year period (from 1969 to 2002) (on this aspect of the question, see Kitaguchi 2022: 527-529). One of the League's aims was to improve the Burakumin's environment and fight inequalities (Kitaguchi 2022: 530). Today, the situation has not been completely resolved, and difficulties remain in employment and education (Kitaguchi 2022: 533). Discrimination is now expressed differently.



Example of a Liberation League assembly held on August 18, 2018.

Source: photograph by Kawaguchi Y.

- 38 The response below summarizes how discriminatory and stigmatizing behaviors have changed:
- Today, you have cell phones, computers, the Internet, Twitter and so on. In the past, you could say face to face: “What this person has said is discriminatory!” You could see the face of the discriminator and identify him or her. But now, that's no longer possible, they're online messages. We don't know who sent it, where it comes from or how it was sent.
- (H., Burakumin, 51 years old, civil servant, involved in the League's activities)
- 39 In recent years, the League's activism has focused on fighting discriminatory comments on the Internet. It has also pushed for the implementation of the law of December 9, 2016, against anti-buraku discrimination (*Buraku sabetsu no kaishô no suishin ni kansuru hôritsu* 部落差別の解消の推進に関する法律) (Uchida, Tsumaki and Saito 2017: 47-48). The law does not impose any penalties for discrimination (Abdarc website), and yet it is clear today that the number of cases of discrimination against Burakumin on the Internet is on the rise (Kitaguchi 2022: 532).
- 40 For several years, Miyabe Tatsuhiko (宮部龍彦), aka Tottori Loop (鳥取ループ), in collaboration with the Jigensha publishing house, has been disclosing buraku locations and personal information about activists and Burakumin online (Kawaguchi 2017a and b, 64 and Abdarc website). In February 2016, Jigensha published a reprint of the national survey of buraku districts dating from 1936, diverting it from its original purpose (Kawaguchi 2017a: 57, 64, Kawaguchi 2017b). The League therefore took legal action to block its publication, and on March 28 of the same year, the court issued an interim injunction banning its publication (Kawaguchi 2017: 65).

- 41 The first court ruling on this case was issued on September 27, 2021. The trial was brought by League activists and people originating from buraku areas against the publishing house. The judge ruled that most of the lists of locations were illegal, banned their publication, and ordered them to be deleted from the Internet. He recognized that publishing the name of these locations could expose plaintiffs to discrimination and defamation in the context of marriage and employment. In its defense, the publishing house argued that banning the publication of buraku names violated “freedom of science and expression” (*gakumon ya hyôgen no jiyû* 学問や表現の自由). This was not considered a valid argument. Most of the plaintiffs’ claims were accepted, but not all of them, so they decided to appeal (the information in this paragraph regarding this court decision is based on an online article in the Asahi shinbun, September 28, 2021).
- 42 On June 28, 2023, the Tokyo High Court (Court of Appeal) issued its decision and recognized “the right to not be discriminated against” (*sabetsusarenai kenri* 差別されない権利), which had not been established previously (TBS News 2023). The lower court’s decision had instead been based on a “violation of the right to privacy” (*puraibashî no shingai* プライバシー権の侵害) (TBS News 2023). The final decision was described as historic by the plaintiffs (TBS News 2023) and is considered a major breakthrough that should lead to the adoption of a law prohibiting discrimination against buraku communities (Kaihô shinbun, July 25, 2023).
- 43 What is interesting in the context of our discussion of the definition of a Burakumin is the fact that in the first trial, the injured parties were identified by their “current address and legal residence” (*genjûsho-honseki* 現住所・本籍). The plaintiffs then pleaded to extend this scope and claimed that people who had previously lived in a buraku district could also suffer discrimination. As a result, the Court of Appeal expanded the scope of the ruling to include people who had “an address and legal residence in the past” (*kako ni jûsho-honseki* 過去に住所・本籍) in a buraku district, as well as people who had current or past close relatives in that case (*shinzoku* 親族). The League used this method to seek recognition of the hereditary nature of anti-buraku discrimination. The Court of Appeal’s decision, which is far more significant than the lower court’s, was the outcome of a seven-year struggle, but the fight is not considered over. The full reprint of the national buraku survey has not been banned, and the amount of damages has been deemed insufficient to act as a deterrent (the information in this paragraph was drawn from the Kaihō shinbun, July 25, 2023).
- 44 In addition to these legal battles, the League continues to be an important source of moral support for discriminated Burakumin. Its members sometimes visit buraku communities to offer advice and organize meetings to raise awareness of discrimination and inequality. Burakumin can also find work within the League, as this woman explains:

I started to work here [at the League] because when I suffered discrimination from my current partner, I realized how ignorant I was about the issue, and that I had no idea how to deal with it. I was unhappy, so I started to study the issue, and as I learned more about the mechanisms and history of discrimination, I realized that if I didn’t do anything, it wouldn’t go away. So, I looked for a place where I could do something about it. When I heard that there were two open positions here [at the League’s office], I applied and was accepted.
(F., 34 years old, League activist)

- 45 The League also helps Burakumin to be more assertive and learn to accept who they are as early as possible. It also allows them to join a community, as this respondent explains:
- They all know it already, my children [that they are Burakumin] [...]. They're also involved in the activities of the buraku liberation movement. They have to learn to introduce themselves at school by saying "I am Burakumin." We teach them that beforehand [...].
 - Why do you continue to participate [in League meetings, etc.]?
 - Since it's impossible to fight alone, it's important to share the same feelings and concerns with everyone. There are also things that you can't think about on your own. It gives me the opportunity to listen to other people's opinions and to hear from people who are in the same situation as I am. It's very stimulating.
- (F., Burakumin, 34 years old, employed in her husband's butcher shop)
- 46 Today, different societal changes have weakened the movement and are keeping it from moving forward, such as the ageing population, the declining birth rate and the right-wing shift of Japanese society (Kitaguchi 2022: 528, 537). The League's decline could also be related to the loss of shared experiences as Burakumin, since the feeling of being discriminated against is correlated with the awareness of being Burakumin (Noguchi 2000: 45).

Conclusion: Burakumin torn between concealment and assertion of a buraku identity

- 47 The complex and singular buraku question is an interesting case study for reflecting on the processes by which minority populations are ascribed to a group or construct their sense of belonging. The situation of the Burakumin today is that of a group subject to a persistent racial ascription that has produced a "social condition" typical of a minority (Mazouz 2020: 40, Ndiaye 2008).
- 48 However, the boundaries separating them from non-Burakumin are not tight but "more or less fluid, shifting and permeable" (Poutignat and Streiff-Fénart 1995: 169). The ambiguous criteria that fluctuate between heredity and place of residence create a continuous oscillation between closure and openness. Thus, we observe that anyone can become a Burakumin (Noguchi 2000: 38), but also that moving out of a buraku district only temporarily erases the stigma associated with it, and that the place of residence itself can be genealogized. Some respondents expressed regret that this ascription had been biologized and was thus impossible to escape. Any link with these districts tends to irreversibly make this ascription hereditary over several generations.
- 49 The group's boundaries are maintained mainly by the non-Burakumin, who hold "the power of naming" (Poutignat and Streiff-Fénart 1995: 155) and thus of maintaining the category alive. Discrimination and stigmatization reinforce the boundaries between non-Burakumin and Burakumin and even lead to reverse discrimination. Respondents reported that some Burakumin parents were firmly opposed to the marriage of their children with non-Burakumin because they did not want them to suffer rejection due to discrimination.
- 50 Two trends could be observed among the Burakumin. Some of them continue to maintain this category alive in reaction to this ascription, while others want to make it disappear by using concealment strategies. The latter wish to break down the barrier

that separates them from non-Burakumin because of the disadvantages associated with it in terms of career and marriage prospects, among other things. To become socially integrated, marriage to a non-Burakumin remains desirable. Discrimination in the context of marriage has notably been described as the “last difficult wall to overcome” (*saigo no koegatai kabe* 最後の越え難い壁) (terms taken from a 1965 government report cited in Saito 2017: 15).

- 51 For others, the awareness that they are Burakumin comes from being subjected to unequal treatment, due to similar experiences of stigmatization and discrimination. This awareness can be based on a shared minority buraku culture. This culture seems to form by default in reaction to the spatial and professional segregation experienced. It may be the consequence of several centuries of ostracism and revolves around language and culinary traditions as described by this woman:

- Do you think there is such a thing as a buraku culture?
- I think so. There’s a way of speaking, a culinary culture too.
- When you say a “way of speaking,” do you mean that there is a buraku dialect?
- Buraku districts have long been closed down, but the old way of speaking has remained. The old-time language of elderly men and women is often used. [...] It’s probably a dialect.
- Do you speak it too?
- I want to speak normally, but when I leave the buraku district, for example, and I chat with friends who are not from the buraku, or at school, people sometimes ask me “Huh? What does that mean?” So, I’m probably speaking a dialect.

(F., Burakumin, 35 years old, employee in a family business specializing in animal husbandry)

- 52 Another way to assert their identity is the organization by young people of Taiko (drum) performances (太鼓) with drums originally made by Burakumin craftsmen who experienced professional discrimination. In some buraku communities, children can join a drumming club and team from an early age. One Burakumin interviewed said he played this traditional instrument within the buraku community for a specific purpose: “As an educational activity, we present musical drum performances as a call to make discrimination disappear” (H., 27). Participation in this type of activity can also strengthen the sense of belonging even after leaving the buraku district. The drum is considered a symbol of traditional buraku culture, and is presented as such in a section dedicated to it at the National Museum of Ethnology (*Kokuritsu minzokugaku hakubutsukan* 国立民族学博物館) in Osaka.



Performance by a drum team in honor of the enactment and enforcement of the 2016 law for the abolition of anti-buraku discrimination.

Source: Website of the city of Shikokuchūō (四国中央): <https://www.city.shikokuchuo.ehime.jp/site/>

- 53 The Taiko performances by young Burakumin can be interpreted as an expression of pride in this ascription and a strategy of resistance. This practice nevertheless seems to be limited to a minority, and among the people we interviewed, hiding is still the norm.
- 54 Although the Suiheisha's 1922 declaration claims that "We can be proud to be Eta," and this phrase is chanted by participants at League meetings, no movement similar to the "Black is beautiful" campaign has emerged in Japan. This is probably because collective protest is not as widespread as in the West. In a context where the words buraku and Burakumin are still taboo and are only implicitly mentioned in conversation, it remains difficult to develop positive feelings of belonging.

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NOTES

1. This term does not refer to a biological difference but to a group that is treated as belonging to a different species, irrespective of the criteria used to set them apart.
2. These recorded interviews include conversations in Japanese that the author held with Burakumin as part of her master's thesis and doctoral thesis defended on December 9, 2022, at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHES). They were supplemented by a questionnaire survey of 200 non-Burakumin conducted in the Hyôgo prefecture. All translations from Japanese to English are original.
3. They are often cited in Japanese and Western works on the buraku issue as representatives of the Senmin category and ancestors of the Burakumin.
4. The obsessive need to physically differentiate the Burakumin to justify their supposed difference continues to this day. During my doctoral study, a non-Burakumin explained to me that he could recognize Burakumin by what he claimed to be a slightly different eye shape.
5. It is important to point out that the derogatory comments about the Burakumin made by non-Burakumin and reformers, presented in this article, reflect their own prejudiced opinions and not those of the author who does not share them.
6. もと「エタ」と呼ば「れるものは、現に日本民族と呼ば「れているものと、民族上なんら区別あるもので「はないということに帰するので「ある。
7. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the word “ethnicity” (minzoku 民族) replaced the word “race” (jinshu 人種) to describe the Burakumin, with the intent of including them and unifying the Japanese Empire. According to historian Yamaji Katsuhiko 山路勝彦 use of the word “ethnicity” (minzoku 民族) began around 1890 at the height of the rise of nationalism (Kurokawa 2016: 116-118).
8. 生物学的にも遺伝的にもなんら事実上の差異がないにもかかわらず、あたかも差異があるかのように幻想されている。
9. 「部落民とは、部落民とみなされ差別された人、あるいは差別される可能性を強くもっている人」というものである。
10. 原田伴彦さんは、部落を「社会通念によって長いあいだ部落だとみなされてきたところ、そして、現にそうみなされているところ」と定義している。
11. When used by the author, the word Burakumin refers to people who are identified or who identify themselves as Burakumin (as per Noguchi M.'s definition: a Burakumin is a person considered as such who has been discriminated against or who is highly likely to be discriminated against (Noguchi 2000: 16, 2001a: 944-945).
12. 全国に散在する吾々が特殊部落民よ団結せよ。
13. 吾々が「エタで「ある事を誇り得る時か「来たのた「。

ABSTRACTS

This article examines how the Burakumin are still excluded in Japan by the concept of “race” and remain ascribed to an inferiorized position even though the principle of equality of all citizens is enshrined in the Japanese Constitution. After a discussion of the contribution of various Japanese publications, the article presents the results of a qualitative and quantitative study conducted among Burakumin and non-Burakumin in several Japanese cities. The article then focuses on current political movements, including the activism of the Buraku Liberation League, which aims to address the social inequalities which persist between the two groups and eliminate discriminatory behavior.

Cet article revient sur la façon dont les Burakumin sont encore altérisés au Japon au moyen du concept de « race » et restent assignés à une position infériorisée bien que le principe d'égalité de tous les citoyens soit inscrit dans la Constitution japonaise. Après avoir discuté les apports de diverses publications en langue japonaise, l'article présente les résultats d'une enquête qualitative et quantitative menée auprès des Burakumin et des non-burakumin dans plusieurs régions du Japon. Sont ensuite examinés les mobilisations actuelles, notamment les activités militantes de la Ligue de libération des buraku, qui visent à réduire les inégalités sociales qui perdurent entre les deux groupes et à faire disparaître les comportements discriminatoires.

INDEX

Keywords: racism, discrimination, stigma, Burakumin, Japan

Mots-clés: racisme, discrimination, stigmaté, Burakumin, Japon

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