BURAKU DISCRIMINATION IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN DISCURSIVE PRACTICES AND IDENTITY

André Pinto Teixeira

The *buraku* discrimination issue in Japan has been discussed in different ways, both at an academic and activist level. Despite divergences in discourse throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the traditional interpretation of the problem is postulated by Inoue (1969) under the "trinity of *buraku*" model, which is, hitherto, the most widely used framework. However, it is not clear whether this conceptual framework is applicable to *buraku* discrimination or *buraku* empowerment in contemporary Japanese society. With that in mind, this paper will begin by reviewing and discussing Inoue's (1969) "trinity of *buraku*," comparing its three core roots of discrimination with contemporary accounts retrieved from secondary sources. Subsequently, we will move on to the question of identity building and presentation within the burakumin communities, referring back to the seminal works of Worchel and Giddens to garner conceptual support. Lastly, this paper will assert the rights of *buraku* discrimination victims' through a multivocal approach that does not replicate discriminatory discourses.

Keywords: Japan, *burakumin*, discrimination, discourse, identity

1. Introduction

Since the Meiji period (1868–1912), the words *buraku* (部落) and *burakumin* (部落民) became synonymous with groups of people in Japan who shared experiences of discrimination based on perceived outcast ancestry, occupation, and/or place of residence. Some scholars involved with the *Buraku* Liberation movement,[1] such as Yoshikazu (1998, 315), described discriminatory practices against *burakumin* as

[1] Activist groups striving for the end of discrimination, such as the *Buraku* Liberation League.

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a residue of the feudal status system under the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867), which condoned and allowed for the systemic oppression of outcasts (穢多 *eta* and 非人 *hinin*) according to their base nature and pollution taboos. These perceptions created a separation between normal folk and unclean peoples, called *senmin* (賤民).

Inoue (1969, 231–236) attempted to explain the roots of *buraku* discrimination by categorizing it into three archetypal typologies: lineage, place of birth or residence, and occupation. However, not only is there no strong evidence for a direct genealogical linkage between feudal outcasts and *burakumin* (McCormack 2013, 74–75), but the notion of *burakumin* as a group, and not merely as a discursive practice, is, in itself, highly problematic.

This study will revisit Inoue's "trinity of *buraku*," mentioned above, which serves as the theoretical and historical basis for an overview and discussion of the relationship between categorization and discrimination in the context of *buraku* discrimination in contemporary Japan. Lastly, it will present the findings of the current research, proposing a more nuanced approach to *buraku* discrimination issue as an academic discipline.

2. *Buraku* discrimination as discourse

2.1 The "trinity of *buraku*"

In 1969, the historian Kiyoshi Inoue (1913–2001) published his emblematic work *The History of Buraku and Liberation Theory* (部落の歴史と解放理論 *Buraku no* rekishi *to kaihō riron*). In this book, Inoue introduces the groundbreaking "trinity of *buraku*" (部落の三位一体 *buraku no sanmi ittai*) model, a framework that has impacted many thinkers and researchers of the *buraku* issue up to this date.

In the first chapters of the book, Inoue introduces the history of Japanese outcasts from the Jōmon period (c. 14,000–300 BCE) up to the Edo period (1603–1867). As Inoue demonstrates, ever since the imperial system was established, there have been outcasts ostracized by society at large and who were in direct submission to the ruling class.[2] Those outcasts included the *hajibe* (土師部, "earthenware artisans"), the *yugebe* (弓削部, "bow makers"), and other artisans of the Nara period (710–1185).

[2] Inoue (1969, 22) uses the term *bumin* (部民) to refer to outcasts in general. While the author himself does not include the *raku* (落) character in his analysis, most works who quote him do, hence the uniformization in this work.

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As the Heian period (794–1185) began and the *ritsuryō* (律令) system[3] declined, the Japanese court moved from Nara to Kyōto. In that period, the distinction between "good people" (良民 *ryōmin*) and "base people" (賤民 *senmin*) became more pronounced. The social pariahs included not only artisans, but also people who took up any occupations that dealt with death, such as butchers and gravediggers. Is it precisely in the Heian period that intermarriage (exogamy) between so-called "good people" and "base people" became legally forbidden by the imperial state. Nevertheless, it is documented that, despite the legal restrictions, marriage between good and base people was not so uncommon, resulting, however, in the social demotion of their children into the base stratum. In those cases, social mobility was exclusively unilateral and warranted nothing but disadvantages and hardship to the people involved. Thus, there is no evidence suggesting that exogamy (hypergamy in particular) was a relevant agent of upward social mobility in the Heian period, due to the inevitable consequences that followed (Inoue 1969, 29).

From the late Heian period to the Muromachi period (1338–1573), outcasts grew into different groups according to their occupation and the way they were referred to. Besides the people known as *kawaramono* (河原者, "people of the riverbed"), outcast groups such as the *shōmoji* (声聞師, "itinerant artists"), the *chasen* (茶筅, "bamboo craftsmen") and the *eta* (穢多, "full of impurity")[4] were also excluded from society at large, despite their invaluable economic contributions. These outcasts had professions that were essential to secure the normal functions of society. Nevertheless, their social status was extremely low, and they were often strongly discriminated against by society at large and institutions directly connected to the state and other local power structures. One such group known as the *kawata* (皮田) was documented as early as the 16th century, often in connection to the West riverbank of Surugafuchūmachi, where they took up leather craftwork as their main occupation. According to historical records, these outcasts gathered near the riverbank, where they formed a *buraku* (部落, "hamlet") (Inoue 1969, 39–40). The term *buraku* would become synonym with discriminated outcasts from the late nineteenth century onward.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the idea that the ancient outcasts were the ancestors of modern *buraku* people was still mainstream. Moreover, for a long time, there have existed many baseless theories and conjectures postulating that the ancient outcasts were foreign technicians from such places as China and the Korean pen-

[3] A Japanese law system based on Confucianism and Chinese Legalism, first implemented through the proclamation of the Taika reforms of 645 AD.

[4] These may also be graphed as *etta*, in katakana or Chinese characters, according to regional pronunciations and spelling disparities. In contemporary Japanese, the term is considered discriminatory and generally banned from usage in the media except in cases where a discrimination incident is being reported and quoted directly.

insula, who had allegedly been deliberately made captive, thus forced to emigrate to Yamato. There, they were supposedly discriminated based on their "polluted" occupations. This line of thought is also present in Inoue's aforementioned work on the trinity of *buraku* (Inoue 1969, 23–24).

But what are, exactly, the three components of the trinity of *buraku*? Let us review them: they are lineage, land, and occupation.

Lineage: The 1976 amendment to the Family Registry Law strived to end unauthorized access and background checks. However, contemporary accounts of crimes concerning illegal access to Family Registries by private detectives and private citizens suggest that the law has failed to thoroughly eradicate such practices associated with *buraku* discrimination, even if they have experienced a drop (Saitō 2017, 8–9). In light of that, one may conclude that lineage is still a relevant factor despite its lack of historical proof. Lineage as a weapon of exclusion is based on perceived heritage and discursive practices that are enormously flexible, adaptive, and indifferent to factual information.

Land: Thanks to investment in infrastructure development promoted by the *Dōwa* Countermeasures Special Law (同和対策事業特別措置法 *Dōwa taisaku jigyō tokubetsu sōchihō*), many historically discriminated *buraku* areas and designated *dōwa* areas (official terminology for *buraku* areas) have become indistinguishable from other neighborhoods. However, it has been speculated that there were many areas where similar infrastructure investment and human rights awareness policies could not be implemented because some areas were not designated by the government as official *dōwa* areas during the period between 1969–2002.

Occupation: One may consider that the disparity between the white-collar and blue-collar classes is becoming wider. However, the traditional labor market is modernizing, propelling a severe rural exodus and a growing acceptance of foreign workers. A number of workers engaged in occupations that have been designated as *buraku* industries have become more diverse, including ethnic Koreans, immigrants, and people of other backgrounds. Therefore, it has become more difficult to discriminate by categorizing people as *burakumin* based on their profession. Nevertheless, the discriminator's standards are essentially arbitrary, hence able of producing new rationales to justify and reproduce discrimination despite changes in context.

2.2 Criticisms of the trinity model

Almost as a direct response to Inoue and his successors, Timothy D. Amos makes a sound rebuttal of these claims, arguing that the ancient outcasts are in no way related to the *buraku* discrimination registered from the late 19th century onward (Amos 2007, 14–15). Even if modern outcasts have been discriminated against due to their occupations, it is impossible to empirically prove that they share a lineage

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with the ancient outcasts. In most cases, the act of discriminating by resorting to history as a pretext is not an act based on any historical proof, but a rationalization process based on prevailing prejudices and discriminatory perceptions.

Now that more than 50 years have passed since Inoue first presented his trinity model, one must pose the following question: Does the trinity of *buraku* still apply to contemporary *buraku* discrimination? In light of recent data, the safest answer is probably that it does, to some degree, but not entirely. In 1969, the Japanese government implemented the *dōwa* Countermeasures Special Law. This law was in effect for 33 years, up to 2002. This piece of legislation allowed for the government to officially designate *dōwa* districts and provide them with financial support for infrastructure, education, and other public projects. While acknowledging the significance of the trinity model, Noguchi (2000, 27–28) points out that contemporary victims of *buraku* discrimination are not necessarily bounded by a particular status (lineage), occupation, or place. The *buraku* have become more and more heterogeneous, thus furthering the ambiguity of its physical and conceptual borders.

According to traditional historiographies and discourses on *buraku* issues, victims of discrimination have been subjected to discrimination by certain criteria that distinguish them from the majority of Japanese. As discussed above, the trinity of *buraku* proposed by Inoue (1969, 231–236) has been widely employed to explain the causes of *buraku* discrimination. It may seem that these three categories perfectly explain why historically discriminated people, such as *eta* and *hinin*, have been ostracized and forced to resort to endogamy (De Vos and Wagatsuma 1972, 118–120). However, is this interpretation applicable to *buraku* discrimination in the latter half of the 20th century and the 21st century?

As Noguchi (2000, 26–28) argues, after the period of accelerated growth that the Japanese economy experienced up to the 1990s when the bubble crisis put an abrupt end to decades of prosperity, and through the *Dōwa* Countermeasures Project of 1969–2002, the number of trinity-like populations is believed to have decreased sharply, leading to growing diversity within *buraku* areas. The boundaries between non-*burakumin* and *burakumin* have also become blurrier. Such a transformation of the *buraku* may be linked to a confluence of trends seen in the 20th century, such as an increase in migrations (both inward and outward) and an increase in the intermarriage/exogamy rate.

The trinity theory also fails to explain the persistence of discrimination after the *Dōwa* Countermeasures Law (1968–2002). Through the implementation of *dōwa* measures by the central government and local governments, the crumbling infrastructure of the *buraku* was repaired, the housing situation was improved, and the enrolment rate of *buraku* youth to high schools and colleges increased sharply. In that sense, it can be said that the affirmative action measures propelled by the

dōwa projects at a nationwide level have raised the living standard of the *buraku* people who belonged to officially designated *dōwa* districts (Kadooka 2013, 97).

However, even if we admit that the former *dōwa* districts now have higher living standards compared to the early 20th century, one cannot ignore that discrimination itself is still occurring, as suggested by manifold activist groups and court cases. Saitō (2017) provides various examples of marriage discrimination in the 2010s. These cases vary from parents opposing matrimony to more extreme and rarer incidents involving violence, kidnappings, and forced abortions, perpetrated by opposing family members, partners, and neighbors.

A particularly famous case that perfectly demonstrates how *buraku* discrimination has adapted to the 21st century is the incident known as the Tottori Loop/Shingensha case. Tottori Loop/Shingensha, a small publisher headquartered in Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture, hinted online that it would publish a reprint of the *National Buraku Survey*, that is, a report that lists all the names of places suspected of being *buraku* areas. This survey is based on the *Buraku Name Directory* (部落地名総鑑 *Buraku chimei sōkan*), an illegal publication that was widely used by large companies in the 20th century as a tool to discriminate job applicants. When Tottori Loop/Shingensha announced that it would publish a reprint, the *Buraku* Liberation League quickly and severely condemned its actions, filing a lawsuit against the publication due to the illegality of the publication itself (*Buraku* Liberation League, 2018/11/12–2882).

Among the discrimination cases that occurred in the 21st century, the Tachibanamachi discriminatory postcard case stands out in particular. From 2003 to 2008, discriminatory postcards were sent one after another to members of the Fukuoka Prefectural Branch of the *Buraku* Liberation League, in Tachibanamachi. The victims were members in charge of human rights awareness and *dōwa* education. In the postcards, the perpetrator wrote that the *Buraku* Liberation League members who engage in educational activities were responsible for transmitting (that is, "polluting") children with their *burakuness* and filthiness. This case reproduces a quintessential type of impurity (穢れ *kegare*) perception, as displayed by the text contained in one of the postcards:

> 部落のあなたが子どもを指導してくれますと子どもたちに部落が伝ります。子どもを体験塾に参加させたいのですが参加させられません。社会教育課を辞めてください。役場を辞めて下さい。
>
> If you keep tutoring children, your *burakuness* will be transmitted unto them. I would like to let my children take part in your association's tutoring activities, but that is not possible with you there. So, please resign from the Educational Affairs department. Leave your position.

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However, if the trinity of *buraku* does not apply to the 21st century, what kind of motivations underlay the prevailing discrimination against the *buraku*? Based on the typology proposed by Inoue in the 1960s, it would be assumed that genealogy, land, and occupation would still be the true motives underlying discrimination. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Noguchi (2000) and other authors, in the 21st century, the trinity model has already become anachronistic in most cases. Therefore, it must be judged insufficient to interpret *buraku* discrimination in contemporary Japan.

In light of this acute contradiction, one question persists: why does prejudice against *buraku* and discriminatory practices prevail if the traditionally held categories no longer seem to apply? The answer might be in Amos's *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan* (2011). Amos (2011, 24–26) defines the term *burakumin* in the following manner:

> A discourse of difference used to define and bind together socially marginalized persons on the Japanese archipelago [...], an imagined community that is believed to have emerged as a result of the common experiences of social marginalization originating in inherited circumstances.

This definition proposed by Amos (2011) appears to be the most suitable to explain *buraku* discrimination in the 21st century, revealing a deep historical consciousness and an enormous level of nuance that Inoue's pioneer model fails to provide.

Having discussed Inoue's trinity of *buraku* and its relevance to the *buraku* issue in contemporary Japan, the following section will address the processes of categorization and identity formation within the context of *buraku* discrimination.

2.3 Evolution and appropriation of the terms *buraku* and *burakumin*

Derogatory terms such as *eta* and *hinin*, as well as other words designating feudal outcasts, are, in most aspects, semantically different from the contemporary label *burakumin* (which is now a sensitive term considered taboo by contemporary Japanese media, despite its wide usage by the *Buraku* Liberation movement). *Eta* and *hinin* were labels based on value judgments, referring to the quality as human beings of the people who were found to be polluted due to their occupations or perceived lineage. If one was to be described as *eta* or *hinin*, their innate value as a human being would be suspect, which, in practical terms, meant that any rights applicable to the general population, including the right to protection, would not technically apply.

Up until the 1871, there were clear legal grounds for segregation based on status (身分 *mibun*). Nevertheless, the term *buraku* originally refers to a location, the settlement or the hamlet, and the people who came from or resided in those

areas, thus the derivation "people of the hamlet" (Amos 2011, 11–14). Unlike the historical names given to outcast communities, the words *buraku* and *burakumin* do not exist within the framework of social strata or *mibun*.

As society at large changed, so did discriminatory practices and discourses. Hatanaka (1993, 143) points out that discriminated peoples were not and are not static entities, but the products of social and political structures within a given time. In that sense, Inoue's and other researchers' usage of the term *burakumin* to refer to outcasts from the Edo period, such as the aforementioned *eta* and *hinin*, may be anachronistic and not in line with the semantic and pragmatic nature of the terms as they have been and are still used by the actors themselves. In contemporary Japan, there are also similarities between accounts of prejudice against the *buraku* and other discriminated groups, such as victims of Minamata's disease, Hansen's disease, and Zainichi Koreans.

To fully understand the *buraku* discrimination issue, one must comprehend how discriminated communities have been perceived, and how the practice surrounding discrimination has been rationalized and justified. Kurokawa (1999, 112) indicated that, in the early 20th century, when ideas based on eugenics became mainstream in the intellectual scene, discriminatory perceptions, and discourses based on the assumption that the *burakumin* belonged to a "different race" or that they were "the descendants of foreigners" gained acceptance in manifold echelons of Japanese society. Social Darwinism gave discriminators a scientifically based justification for exclusion.

> *Buraku* people who were discriminated against were virtually perceived as being "from a different race" [...]. It could be said that it was a recognition that had almost the same meaning as the racism that had disseminated after the Russo-Japanese War, although it did not specify biological differences. (Kurokawa 1999, 112)

What is striking is that even Inoue, who makes occasional references to the possible foreign origin of the *bumin*, calls the origin stories (and histories) of *buraku* communities "legends" or "myths" (Inoue 1969, 41). These origin theories, while lacking in empirical groundings, have been widely used to rationalize discrimination of anyone perceived to be *burakumin*. Nevertheless, this kind of discourse became prominent and even the orthodoxy within the *Buraku* Liberation movement, assuming the role of a unifying myth and fundamental axis of the liberation discourse and its narratives. This fact is noticeable in the Suiheisha (水平社, Leveler's Association) Declaration of 1922, where the liberation activists refer to themselves as eta. This allowed them to appropriate the derogatory term that was used against them, going as far as calling upon their "discriminated ancestors." This was a dramatic calling that could only be possible by referring to an imagined common history. In this manner, the Leveler's Association attempted to construct

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its own narrative and, thus, subvert the asymmetrical relation between society at large and outcast groups at the time.

It was precisely because the discriminated *buraku* peoples of the 20th century perceived themselves as descendants of feudal outcasts that a distinct culture of the *buraku* was "invented." Kobayakawa (2018, 232–235), a fierce critic of discourses that emphasized the otherness of the *buraku*, calls this phenomenon the "trap of identity." According to Kobayakawa, since the communities that became the discriminated *buraku* areas are extremely diverse in their geography, economic activities, and history, narratives calling upon the unity of the *burakumin* end up perpetuating a homogenous and limiting image of the *buraku* which is ultimately harmful to the actors themselves. By limiting the experiences of discriminated *burakumin* to a particular culture, profession, and/or identity, regardless of their own identity, one might inadvertently disseminate the same stereotypes that are at the root of individual and structural discrimination. As examples of particular cultural practices that have been reinterpreted by the *Buraku* Liberation movement as unique to the *buraku*, Kobayakawa (2018, 238–239, 244–245) lists the *harigoma* (春駒) dance of Sado Island and the performance art of *kadozuke* (門付)[5] in Shibata city (both in Niigata prefecture) as prototypical cases of this invention process. According to Kobayakawa's reading of ethnographic and historical documents, there is little evidence suggesting that *harigoma* and *kadozuke* in these regions had historically been linked to segregated communities. This reframing happened only in the 20th century as a conscientious effort by the *Buraku* Liberation movement to create a historiography of *burakuness* based on an invented cultural uniqueness.

By actively identifying, promoting, and passing on the culture of the discriminated *buraku*, the activists and members of liberation movements "invented" particular traditions or connotations of pre-existing traditions that had not existed hitherto. As Hobsbawm (1983, 4, 7) argued, inventing a tradition based on the past (history, genealogy, etc.) is mainly a process of formalization and ritualization. The historical continuation itself must be created by each society and community at any given time. Similarly, traditions (such as folklore and customary forms of art) that were invented or became associated with the distinctive culture of the *buraku* people embodied the boundaries of discriminated *buraku* peoples who were scattered all over the country. This strengthened the sense of community within each community. People who shared the same experience of discrimination were, henceforth, called "brothers" and "comrades." These were inclusive terms that stressed their shared experiences and feelings of brotherhood. Inter-

[5] A type of traditional performing art consisting in visiting people's houses and standing in front of their entrance asking for metal items.

estingly, the term "comrade" stopped being used in the liberation movement as soon as the *Buraku* Liberation League cut its ties to the Communist Party in the 1970s (Aoki 2018). As a result, the invention of a distinct culture and traditions produced an unnatural heterogeneity in the discriminated *buraku*, thus emphasizing its difference from the so-called "non-*buraku*" Japanese (a category that only makes sense in the context of a non-negotiable dichotomy). This unwanted accentuation of distinctive features has been criticized by some who believe that it may, inadvertently, hinder *buraku* communities from being accepted in society at large (Kobayakawa 2018, 250).

Activists who advocate for the rights of the *buraku* often refuse to use words such as *dōwa* (同和), which means harmonious, and is preferred by government agencies when dealing with the *buraku* issue. They reject silence as a pathway to equality. These *buraku* activists defend that it is necessary to promote the empowerment and social equality of the people who are discriminated against based on their location or occupation, which includes their right to proclaim their distinct identities without fear of repercussions. The eradication of discrimination can only be considered thorough if it includes the possibility of self-affirmation (or coming out).

Moreover, Kobayakawa's (2018) argument against *buraku* culture seems to fall short when considering the pertinent legislation. Even if people from discriminated *buraku* communities had chosen to embrace a unique culture that is different from the mainstream culture of their place of residence, Article 14 of the Constitution of Japan enshrines the right of all citizens to be treated equally, regardless of their identities or backgrounds. Therefore, the ostracism of discriminated *buraku* based on the argument of "otherness" can only be seen as a crass violation of Japanese law and social norms regarding equity of treatment. In that light, Kobayakawa's criticisms, even if well-intentioned, may be interpreted as a form of victim-blaming that is often at the root of discriminatory practices in Japanese society.

As previously mentioned, the trinity of *buraku* model advanced by Inoue (1969) stipulates three elements that are indivisible from the *buraku* areas: land (one or one's family's place of origin and/or residential area), status (historical or imagined), and occupation (so-called "*buraku* industries" or other occupations deemed to be impure). In 1913, the ethnologist Kunio Yanagita considered the possibility that the discriminated *burakumin* had their origins in a land other than Japan. He defined a *buraku* community simply as an area ravaged by poverty, high unemployment, and subpar living conditions (Yanagita 1913, 108, 111).

Buraku discrimination is, in fact, closely related to poverty and limited social mobility. Nevertheless, according to Inoue, the reason why *buraku* discrimination did not disappear in the 20th century is because the *buraku* issue might not only

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be a matter of class disparity (socio-economic standing). "No matter how much money they have or how good their neighborhood looks like: as soon as they are called 'the people from that area,' they will be discriminated against" (Inoue 1969, 231). That is, although the *buraku* people who have been subjected to discrimination have historically experienced economic difficulties based on their exclusion from society, their economic situation is not the root of the discrimination and social exclusion that they face. Rather, they have been discriminated against because they are from or reside in an area that is itself avoided and ostracized because they took up occupations such as tanning, meat processing, or garbage collection, that were deemed as impure, or because they are perceived to be the heirs of feudal outcasts, which results in being sentenced to the bottom strata of society. Nevertheless, it is sensible to suppose that people who are subject to *buraku* discrimination may also be excluded from society based on their class and other factors, but, in that case, it is hard to determine whether it should fall under the category of *buraku* discrimination or if it is simply an expression of classism and/or the general disparities that reside in Japanese society at large.[6]

3. Categorization and identity formation in the context of *buraku* empowerment

3.1 Deschamps and Devos, and Giddens

In this brief section, I will start by defining the concept of categorization as used in this article, which relies mostly on the previous conceptual work by Jean-Claude Deschamps and Thierry Devos (1998) and Anthony Giddens (1991). The clarification of these concepts will be followed by an analysis of identity formation within the context of *buraku* discrimination and the challenges that it poses.

Deschamps and Devos (1998, 4) define categorization as a process through which individuals divide "the environment into groups of subjects which are or seem to be similar according to certain criteria." As the author points out, one of the major consequences of this simplification process is the exaggeration of contrastive features as a resource to enhance the identity of one's group (Deschamps and Devos 1998, 4). Sakurai (2005, 36–37) distinguishes between innocuous processes of categorization, needed for individuals to navigate the world around

6 One must also consider meta-discrimination within the discriminated communities. This may include discrimination based on class, gender, and nationality. Moreover, people from discriminated *buraku* areas may experience multiple forms of discrimination, such as discrimination for being both from a *buraku* area and for being a woman, a member of a sexual minority, a migrant worker, or the victim of a contagious or stigmatized disease, such as Minamata's or Hansen's disease, etc.

them, and discriminatory categorization. Through this process, the dominant culture unilaterally imposes a particular form of life onto a group of people, whose self-awareness often ends up being entirely ignored.

At this stage, it is equally important to clarify the meaning of self-identity as used in this paper. Self-identity presupposes reflexive awareness and has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual (Giddens 1991, 52). While self-categorization theory recognizes that negative outcomes, such as a shared experience of oppression can lead to strengthened group cohesion, such as in the case of Jewish communities in the US, for a given group to effectively exist it must first define *itself* as such (Robinson 1996, 35). In his pioneer work on group identity, Henri Tajfel connects social identity to belonging to a certain social group to which the individual attributes emotional and evaluative significance (Tajfel 1972, 272–275).

By comparing Deschamps and Devos's and Tajfel's understanding of categorization and group identity with common strategies of bracketing and passing among targets of *buraku* discrimination (Bondy 2015, 10–12), one may conclude that, for a vast number of hypothetical members of the *burakumin*, their aspired group identity is that of a so-called ordinary Japanese citizen, defined by their personal history and experiences, just like any other individual around them, and not simply a product of past or future instances of discrimination that they may encounter during their lifetime. Bracketing is essentially a strategy aiming at covering up stigma (Goffman 1959) and avoiding social exclusion. In that sense, one must admit that bracketing or fully concealing one's linkage to *buraku* markers of difference (hometown or place of residence, occupation, etc.) is not necessarily an act of self-identification with the *burakumin* category.

3.2 Becoming *burakumin*

As aforementioned, *burakumin* as a fixed category is, in itself, highly problematic. Firstly, because individuals who are categorized in such a manner might not necessarily identify with the label. It is vital to keep in mind that *burakumin* or discriminated *buraku* (被差別部落 *hisabetsu buraku*) are terms that do not refer to real and specific communities, but rather to diverse peoples and communities that might not share much other than the common experience of discrimination or being targeted due to perceived otherness. In this sense, the *buraku* as a conceptual space may be defined as a sort of Foucauldian heterotopia, "a collection whose members have few or no intelligible connections with one another," as defined by Mead (1995–1996, 13–31).

Secondly, a unilateral categorization of *buraku* discrimination victims deprives individuals of their identity, often mistreating them as mere receptacles of external discrimination acts. As a result, this type of identity imposition through discourse

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excludes the voices of the very people who have been discriminated against or have lived in fear of segregation.

A common opinion on how to end discrimination against *burakumin* is the theory of natural extinction, popularly known as the "do not wake up a sleeping child" (寝た子を起こすな *neta ko o okosu na*) approach. According to its proponents, silence and absolute ignorance about the issue of discrimination will naturally lead to the end of such practices. In practical terms, that means that the *buraku* issue should be absent from school curricula and the media and that the end of discrimination should be sought through general human rights promotion and public policies that improve the standard of living of a given community. This approach, however, raises a few questions about its efficiency and feasibility. Recent accounts of marriage discrimination and discriminatory remarks online (Saitō 2017, 2–9) suggest that certain forms of discrimination persist to this day despite the public and civic efforts to eradicate them.

In the 21st century, more than a century after the legal abolition of outcast status in 1871, the only available means to trace a person's real outcast lineage is through the family registry (戸籍 *koseki*). After the reformation law of 1976, it became illegal to access other people's family registers without prior consent. Nevertheless, some studies suggest that even in recent years private detectives and detective agencies have unlawfully accessed and leaked transcripts of many household registers upon request by employers, parents, or spouses who wished to conduct background checks (身元調査 *mimoto chōsa*) to determine whether a future employee or spouse was from a *buraku* area (Saitō 2017, 8–9). Hence, even if one assumes that the incidence of discrimination has become comparatively lower than in the past, it is far too optimistic to expect that silence and ignorance will suffice to completely solve the long-lasting issue of *buraku* discrimination.

Therefore, it is not particularly surprising that many *buraku* rights activists and researchers, alike, choose the opposite approach, by prioritizing frankness, open dialogue, and education as the keys to correct discriminatory mindsets and behaviors. Even so, both researchers of this issue and *buraku* rights advocates must recognize that an open approach to discrimination is, in its core, inalienable from social categorization. That is, one can only choose openness if one is ready to accept *burakumin* as an isolated category. In some cases, doing research on the *buraku* issue may unconsciously bring about the unwanted result of reproducing discrimination by solidifying the *burakumin* category (Miura 2009, 11–13). While recognizing that dealing with the *buraku* issue may lead to undesired consequences, Miura (2009) defends the role of the researcher as that of a clarifier, who sheds light on the mechanisms which give birth to *burakumin* as a representation only visible to certain people. Moreover, the author considers it necessary to take into account the conditions which allow for the persistence of *buraku* discrimi-

nation in modern society, characterized by a plurality of representations of *buraku* and *burakumin* which diverge on their positive or negative value judgments about these imagined categories (Miura 2009, 12).

Despite the imposed nature of the category and the difficulty of identifying its supposed members, many reports and studies accept the a priori existence of *burakumin* as a tangible, clearly defined group. Some accounts go as far as presenting *burakumin* as "Japan's biggest minority,"[7] a straightforward description that gives the illusion of homogeneity in a country that is, in fact, far from cohesive (Gottlieb 2006, 50).

Confronted with the problematic recognition of *burakumin* as a tangible group, one must be bold enough to ask the following difficult question: who is, then, part of the *burakumin*? Is anyone a *burakumin* to begin with? A straightforward definition would be that anyone who shares the experience or fear of discrimination based on their place of birth or residence, occupation or perceived lineage might become a *burakumin*, at least at a social and interpersonal level. That is the classical understanding based on Inoue's trinity, as previously discussed. While this broad definition encompasses many central issues of the *buraku* discrimination problem, it fails to accommodate the most important aspect of identity: the right of individuals to construe their own identity and present it or conceal it as they desire. Advocates of *buraku* rights, such as the National Leveler's Association, from 1922 to 1943, and the *Buraku* Liberation League (部落解放同盟 Buraku kaihō dōmei), founded in 1946 (and renamed in 1955), openly embraced *burakumin* as a banner of their identity, as seen in the Suiheisha declaration of 1922, which has been mentioned before in this article: "People of the special hamlets [*tokushu burakumin*] from all over the country, assemble" (Suiheisha Declaration 1922).

Nevertheless, one must also consider the clear difference between the term *burakumin* as used by the Suiheisha and other advocates, and how the term has been employed by outside actors (government, journalists, aggressors, etc.). The latter may, in many cases, impose unto unwilling actors an identity with which they do not identify. As James et al. (1997, 4) point out, when we think about identity, we must value multivocality. That is, to listen closely to the actors themselves, paying close attention to the way they choose to express and present themselves. In that sense, even activists and researchers who strive to end discrimination against the *buraku* areas must privilege how the actors themselves choose to form

[7] In Western media, in particular, the discriminated *buraku* communities are often referred to as the untouchables of Japan, or Japan's largest minority. This type of nomenclature has also penetrated the discourses of some South Asian human rights advocates, who refer to *burakumin* as Japan's equivalents of India's Dalits or Harijans. This nomenclature might have its roots in Orientalism and colonialism, which appropriated "caste" and other conceptual frameworks from South Asian societies and unilaterally imposed them into different cultural contexts.

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and express their own identities when conveying their particular challenges to a broader audience.

Multivocality is and must be one of the main pillars of any discussion that deals with direct accounts of discrimination by its victims. On the other hand, one must also discuss the mutability of identity. Migrations, increasing rates of intermarriage, urbanization, and the absence of strong communal interactions in urban areas have made it increasingly harder to cite strong correlations between places of residence or origin and traceable *buraku* backgrounds. According to Sakurai (2005, 36–37), the transformations that have shaped *buraku* areas in the past decades, such as the allotment of public funds for *dōwa* education and the establishment of social welfare centers, have not only changed living conditions but have also increased the ambiguity of the borders of the *burakumin* category as defined by the dominant culture.

Victims of discriminatory discourses and practices in marriage and employment do not necessarily self-identify as the categories assigned to them by their discriminators (whether individuals or institutions) or by the *Buraku* Liberation League members and allies. Furthermore, concealing a connection with the *buraku* by outsiders does not necessarily constitute a statement of identity. In some cases, this behavior should rather be understood purely as a self-defense mechanism, given the social stigma that they may face otherwise.

On a purely ideal level, it is reasonable to affirm that it would only be reasonable to ascribe a given group identity to the *burakumin* if the hypothetical members of the imagined group self-identified and presented themselves as such. However, without reflexive awareness of one's membership, *burakumin* as a group becomes an imposed category that relegates its coerced members to a condition of utter powerlessness and silence.

Then, let us compare the case of *buraku* discrimination with discrimination based on sexual orientation. In many countries throughout the world, sexual minorities have historically hidden their true identities due to fear of persecution and social stigmata (Brekhus 2003, 78–79). However, as laws, cultures, and dominant values shift towards acceptance of different types of sexual orientations and lifestyles, LGBTQ individuals are more likely to proudly embrace and exhibit their identities not only as individuals but also as members of a larger group of people with shared values and experiences.

Yet, in the case of *burakumin* that does not seem to be the case. Even in the 21st century, when instances of discrimination have become less visible compared to the prior century, the treatment of *buraku* issues as taboo makes it difficult to determine how most victims of discrimination see themselves and choose to present themselves publicly. In her study of education on assimilation issues (*dōwa kyōiku* 同和教育), Gordon (2015, 125–126) describes how teachers who attempted to relate

to their students of *buraku* or Korean *zainichi* backgrounds ended up "imposing onto young people identities that the students *clearly* did not wish to embrace." The teachers in this account would have certainly benefited from hearing the students' voices, thus contributing to a smoother formation of their self-identities. The problem lies not in each individual, but in the public policies that shape the curricula and guidelines on the teaching of *dōwa kyōiku*. Changing policies might, therefore, be a necessary step toward achieving the goal of eradicating *buraku* discrimination.

For identity not to be imposed, it must be formed voluntarily by the actors themselves (individuals or communities). In a candid account of his experiences as someone who grew up in a discriminated area, author Nobuhiko Kadooka, who proudly identifies himself as *burakumin*, expresses his belief that the continuity of *buraku* and *burakumin* as relevant categories will only be possible if an associated *buraku* culture follows suit (Kadooka 2013, 214). In other words, if the discriminated *burakumin* do not possess a unique culture and only share their hometown and/or the culture of their place of residence, it may not be meaningful to identify with a *burakumin* category, which is, in many cases, imposed exogenously. His view seems to echo that of Kobayakawa, previously discussed in this article. Although the implications of culture as used by Kadooka are not clear, people in the *buraku* people who are discriminated against can openly embrace their identities or, as an alternative, choose identities that are not related to discrimination in any fashion. If one takes into account every individual's right to live freely, according to their own terms, it is clear that Kadooka's ideas about identity may rely too heavily on discourses that are mainstream in the Liberation Movement and may not reflect the plurality of opinions on what it means to be *burakumin*, both as an individual and as a community.

Considering the difficulties of definition and the imposed nature of this category, *burakumin* should, henceforth, be presented not as a cohesive social group but, as Amos (2011, 24–26) brilliantly advocates, as a "an imagined community that is believed to have emerged as a result of the common experiences of social marginalization."

Unlike members of sexual minorities, who are defined by their sexual orientation, lifestyle, and reflexive discourse, people referred to as *burakumin* are, in many cases, unwillingly ascribed to this fluid category, which changes boundaries and definitions according to evolving circumstances and social context. In other words, one may observe that the implications of the term *burakumin* as used by activists and the parties involved and their discriminators (directly or indirectly) are quite different.

In the hypothetical community of *burakumin*, the alleged characteristics of the group (that is, other than the common experience of discrimination) are created

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by the discriminators' arbitrary criteria or by the mythical narratives of activist groups. How, then, do the victims of discrimination become members of this so-called group?

It can be said that the circumstances inherited by the victims of discrimination, that is, the series of situations in which they are subjected to social exclusion, are "thrown at them" without any consideration of the victim's awareness and will. Although some people may identify as *burakumin* and be proud of that identity, those who have become *burakumin* because they were discriminated against or were at risk of being discriminated against experience a sudden paradigm shift. That is, the process of becoming a member of an imaginary community that is inconsistent in most aspects, besides the common experience of discrimination, presenting vague boundaries and commonalities, from being considered normal through the lens of social norms and expectations. In other words, there is no liminal state between being a non-*burakumin* and a *burakumin* because of the experience and risk of being discriminated against. The first acts of discrimination and the revelation of one's origins (whether historically proven or as a product of discourse) subject the victimized individual to a new reality. With this new paradigm, discriminated individuals will have to choose between bracketing and passing, or openly accepting their new imposed identities. Individuals who are subjected to *buraku* discrimination have no choice but to act according to this new paradigm since that in which these individuals were not subjected to *buraku* discrimination by external volition and actions does no longer exist.

The self-inquiring nature of the victims of *buraku* discrimination raises many questions about self-identity. To answer this particular question, it may be valuable to refer back to Giddens's *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991). Self-identity is "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography" and presupposes recursive consciousness, "which must always be constructed and sustained by the individual's recursive activity" (Giddens 1991, 52–53). Individuals who are from *buraku* or who may be subjected to *buraku* discrimination must discover their history and traditions in order to decide whether to accept or reject their *burakumin* identity.

This self-discovery process sheds light on an important dimension of self-identity: time. According to Latour (2005, 200), all interactions are diachronic in nature, not synchronic. It is not the case that an individual becomes an exclusive *burakumin* at the moment when he becomes aware of the attributes of the *burakumin* category, through his own inquiry and external categorization. Becoming and being a member of the discriminated *burakumin*, as a category, is a culmination of the cumulative knowledge, experiences, and discourses that the term *burakumin* encompasses, including various conceptual and practical implications. These parameters make up the *burakumin* category through a sense of values, percep-

tions, and zeitgeist that may change rapidly at each point in time. According to psychological research, the formation of self-identity and the recognition of time are closely related. Kimura (1982, 36–37) states that "a sound self-identity requires an expansive awareness of betweenness in time." In other words, an individual should have a strong awareness of the different time intervals (past and past, past and present, present and future). Therefore, the victims of *buraku* discrimination can engage in self-reflection on their identity and social status by having a sound perception of time. Giddens insists on the spatial and temporal facets of self-identity. These aspects are premised on having "a continuity across time and space [...] as interpreted reflexively by the agent" (Giddens 1991, 53).

In short, members of the imagined *burakumin* category are not just passive containers of discrimination, but active and recursive people. Despite being "thrown" into this reality, the *buraku* subjects may live by pursuing history, while having a strong sense of time and examining themselves. As a result, the targets/victims of *buraku* discrimination are able to decide whether to accept or reject the identity that has been externally attributed to them. Of course, it is also possible for the people who are discriminated against to unite and write their own narratives as individuals and communities and change the meaning of the category of *burakumin*. However, to change the meaning of *burakumin* it is necessary to take into account not only the will of the parties but also the reliable support of their allies, as well as a public policy of zero tolerance that must follow suit.

4. Conclusion

This article discussed Inoue's trinity of *buraku* and how it fits into contemporary cases of *buraku* discrimination. The persistence of discriminatory practices well beyond the affirmative action campaigns that sought to improve living conditions in discriminated areas suggests that the problem lies not so much in physical spaces or genealogies but discourse.

After having established that the *buraku* is not a static entity but a mere product of discourse, corresponding to imagined communities of immense diversity (heterotopia), the present study goes on to champion the importance of reflexive and conscientious processes of self-identity making in the construction of *buraku* narratives that do not fall in the pitfalls of traditional historiographies and imposed labels. While the victims of *buraku* discrimination have mostly been defined by either their aggressors (in the form of individuals, groups, or the media) or the liberation movement, independent accounts from *burakumin* that do not fall into the traditional categories are still extremely rare. This scarcity can also be linked to the absence of representation in the Japanese media, who have adopted the

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"do not wake up a sleeping child" approach to avoid reproach from activists and stir up controversy.

Despite the lack of evidence that supports the usage of these terms in the 21st century, the terms "untouchable" and "outcast" still seem to be mainstream, at least in Western and, in some instances, South Asian reporting on the *buraku* issue.

In conclusion, as discussed throughout the article, this treatment of the *buraku* as a static category poses many issues relating to identity. Ideally, the term *burakumin* as an attribute marker would only be applied when referring to people who reflexively accept and present *burakumin* as their own identity, as is often the case among Liberation League activists, rather than being forced unilaterally by an external agent. The act of referring as *burakumin* to someone who does not identify in such a manner is, in itself, an instance of discrimination. Well-meaning activists and researchers, in particular, must tread carefully while addressing this issue, so as not to impose categories unto other individuals, while allowing for the actors themselves to choose their own identities and how they prefer to construe and present them. As James et al. (1997, 12–13) point out, expression is also a political practice. Social scientists, such as anthropologists, take into account the dialogues and asymmetrical power relationships that underlie expression practices, even when trying to convey the worldview and perspective in the representation of the helpless and voiceless. Therefore, this chapter asserts the responsibility of researchers who deal with discrimination issues and the importance of multivocality in social science research. Similarly, efforts such as the Settlement social work projects (隣保事業 *rinpo jigyō*) and *dōwa* education aimed at empowering *buraku* people who have been discriminated against should also take into account the position of victims and their own identities without imposing them a fossilized and stereotypical image of a *buraku*. The question of how to close the divide between discourses and self-identity has yet to be answered.

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