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# Gradual Disappearance of the Hisabetsu Buraku Story

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## 1 Introduction

*Burakumin* is a common term used in English literature about Japan for people long treated as outcasts from mainstream Japanese society. Since the second half of the twentieth century until today, they have been portrayed as the largest and most frequently discriminated minority in Japan.

While this description may sound fairly straightforward to English readers, even to many Japanese, these people have been shrouded in mystery. Several factors contribute to their present hiddenness: lack of information and education about *burakumin*; ambiguity about the term *burakumin*; an official approach that has been deliberately low-profile; and the obscurity that comes from political correctness.

Professor Midori Kurokawa of Shizuoka University has been a prominent researcher of the buraku issue for more than three decades. Her book *A Created 'Race': Buraku Discrimination and Racism* clearly written for academic readership traces a historical journey that starts soon after the Meiji Restoration. The Emancipation Edict (abbreviated in Japanese as *Kaihōrei*), promulgated in 1871, officially gave former outcasts *eta* and *hinin* (the two lowest caste groups) equal status to other citizens of Japan. As groundbreaking as the edict was, perhaps understandably a government decree could not instantly bring changes to the centuries-old societal structure.<sup>1</sup> Researchers<sup>2</sup> argue the situation of the former outcasts actually got worse during the Meiji period. They lost monopolies of their “polluted” trades such as slaughtering animals

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Amos 2011; DeVos/Wagatsuma 1966; McCormack 2012.

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**Original Title:** Hisabetsu Buraku to yū Katari no Muka/Kōtai 被差別部落」という語りの無化／後退, by Midori Kurokawa みどり黒川, in Kurakawa 2016: 252–254

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and shoemaking, which further exacerbated their economic situation. Also, violent demonstrations against former *eta* were not uncommon in early Meiji. Several *burakumin* organizations emerged in the twentieth century of which the most prominent were the Zenkoku Suiheisha (National Levelers Association) founded in 1922 and its successor the Buraku Kaihō Dōmei (Buraku Liberation League) founded in 1955.

Kurokawa explains that early research during Meiji period, often amateur and prejudiced, tried to establish the origin of “these people”. New terminology came into use which reflected old patterns of bias. Throughout her text, Kurokawa prefers the term *hisabetsu buraku* to *burakumin*.<sup>3</sup> On the use of these different labels, Timothy D. Amos in English,<sup>4</sup> Hatanaka in Japanese<sup>5</sup> or Michihiko Noguchi in Japanese<sup>6</sup> give helpful perspectives.

Kurokawa’s concise work introduces the opinions of such buraku writers and activists as Taisaku Kitahara,<sup>7</sup> Nobuhiko Kadooka,<sup>8</sup> the Buraku Liberation League<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The original meaning of the word *buraku* means a hamlet. As for the terminology, the words used during Tokugawa period *eta* (much filth) and *hinin* (non-humans) are nowadays considered highly derogatory. During Meiji period, new terms such as *tokushu buraku* (special hamlets) and *shin-heimin* (new commoners) were coined. These labels, though less offensive than *eta* and *hinin*, kept suggesting that former outcastes were a separate and different entity within the Japanese society. The word most often used in the contemporary English literature is *burakumin* (*buraku* people). This word is also relatively common in Japanese, though it may be considered a stiff and technical “movement word”, i. e. used by organizations such as Buraku Liberation League. The term *hisabetsu buraku* translates as discriminated-against *buraku* (hamlets). The words *buraku* and *burakumin* are sometimes capitalized.

<sup>4</sup> Amos 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Hatanaka, Asaji, and Uchida 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Noguchi 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Taisaku Kitahara (1906–1981) became well known in 1927 when he courageously presented a petition against buraku discrimination directly to the Emperor. At that time, Kitahara was a soldier and the Emperor came to observe the maneuvers. He was sentenced to one year in prison. Later on he became active in *Suiheisha* and other buraku organizations (Hane 2003). He also wrote several books on discrimination and buraku history.

<sup>8</sup> Nobuhiko Kadooka (\*1963) is a contemporary freelance writer and journalist. He also writes about buraku issues and received the Kōdansha Non-fiction Award in 2011 and the Excellence Prize of Shōgakukan Non-fiction Award in 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Buraku Liberation League (BLL) is the biggest and most influential postwar buraku organization. Since its establishment in 1955 and especially in the period of its 1960s and 1970s heyday, BLL’s main agenda was the fight against discrimination and improvement of buraku areas. BLL, unlike buraku activists linked to the Japanese Communist Party, vows to continue emphasizing buraku issues even in contemporary Japan after much progress in its objectives was achieved.

and, especially, Kenji Nakagami.<sup>10</sup> Winner of the 1975 Akutagawa Award,<sup>11</sup> Nakagami, takes center stage in Kurokawa's book because his opinions were loud, unique, critical, and sometimes hard to understand. His notion of the "disappearing" *roji* (explained in the translated text), a term he often chose to use for *hisabetsu buraku* and its people, makes his contribution a distinctive part of the book.

The translation that follows is from the last section of Kurokawa's book. It deals with an important transition in Japanese society since 2002, when policies to support *hisabetsu buraku* officially ended.<sup>12</sup> That change has been the progressive loss of visibility of *hisabetsu buraku*. Kurokawa's most notable observation is that *buraku* human rights have been slowly absorbed into, and are now being superseded by, the general narrative of human rights. This has effectively made the issues of *hisabetsu buraku*, such as discrimination in marriage or hate speech, less visible.

Kurokawa provides examples from popular culture, especially film, to show how views about the *buraku* problem are shifting. It is very important to discern and understand the shift in perception in popular culture as this shapes the opinions of the general population and especially young people about the issue.

The exposition of the decreasing visibility of the *buraku* problem in popular culture is undoubtedly one of the book's most significant and up-to-date contributions. It helps to raise important questions: Why has the *buraku* issue been sidelined? And more importantly, does it mean the *buraku* problem has been solved? Kurokawa, citing anecdotal stories in the last chapter of the book, gives a strong negative answer to the second question. The problem has not been

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<sup>10</sup> Kenji Nakagami (1946–1992) was an acclaimed Japanese novelist who was open about his buraku origin.

<sup>11</sup> Akutagawa Prize is a prestigious Japanese literary prize named after author Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927). It has been awarded semiannually since 1935 for the best work of serious fiction by a new or rising author.

<sup>12</sup> These policies were based on a Dōwa Special Measures Law (*Dōwa Taisaku Jigyō Tokubetsu Sochihō*) that was passed in 1969 and renewed several times until finally discontinued by the government in 2002. The Japanese term *dōwa* means assimilation. The objective of Dōwa Special Measures Law was to improve infrastructure in *buraku* areas and to promote so called *dōwa* education (*dōwa kyōiku*) that highlighted the issue of *buraku* human rights at schools and provided extra classes for children from *buraku* areas. In total, the Japanese state spent around 15 trillion yen during the 28 years when the law was effective (Amos 2011). While regional differences may naturally exist, overall, the measures were undoubtedly successful in bringing the living standards of residents of *buraku* areas to a level comparable with non-*buraku* areas. Various controversies regarding the measures surfaced in the past. The criticisms centered on claims of the negative image of positive discrimination among non-*buraku* population, corruption linked to the improvement projects and the split in the *buraku* movement.

solved. And *buraku* discrimination still persists. Kurokawa criticizes a relativist or oversimplifying approach to *buraku* discrimination and in her view the best approach would be to confront the issue directly.

## 2 Translation

### Gradual disappearance of the *Hisabetsu Buraku* story

#### 1 Declining awareness of the *Buraku* problem

Awareness of the *buraku* problem appears to vary from one region to another but another trend can also be observed. In recent years, a growing number of younger Japanese people do not know about the *buraku* problem. A survey of Tokyo adults aged 20 and above, conducted in February 2013 by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, illustrates this development. The study's *Report of Results of a Survey on Human Rights* can be found at <http://www.metro.tokyo.jp/INET/CHOUA/2014/04/60o48111.htm>.

The age of respondents appears to be a primary factor. Overall, 80.8 percent of respondents “know the *dōwa* problem”.<sup>13</sup> For males aged 50–59, the recognition was 90.9 percent, but for males aged 20–29, this fell to 71.0 percent. The decline by age was similar among women. For females aged 40–59, the recognition was 84.7 percent, while for females aged 20–29, it was 65.4 percent. Among adult Tokyo residents, then, recognition of the *dōwa* problem was greatest among older males and females, and least among those in their twenties. However, responses to the question about whether people “know the *dōwa* problem” may need to be interpreted with caution because of the varying depth of knowledge of the problem.

Consider the question: “How did you learn about the *dōwa* problem?” Three responses had similar frequency: 22.8 percent learned about it from mass media like TV, radio, newspapers, books etc., 21.9 percent learned about it at school, and 19.0 percent heard from the grandparents, parents, brother or sister etc. Learning from family members may include information with a negative bias

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<sup>13</sup> *Dōwa problem* is an alternative term for *buraku* problem. The word *dōwa* means assimilation and is preferred by the Japanese administration. Nowadays, perhaps a more politically correct term in English might be for example “*buraku* issues”, a term that avoids the word problem and the plural form suggests a variety of “problems”. It should be noted, however, that for reasons suggested by Kurokawa the word *buraku* is not commonly used in contemporary Japan.

based on personal prejudice or selective experience. On the other hand, learning from mass media, or at school, may be of the simplest form and include only superficial insights or limited information.

In my experience, the knowledge about the issue that university students in Tokyo, unlike in Kansai and certain other parts Japan, have rarely extends beyond facts gleaned from textbooks. Also, ignorance cannot automatically imply that not knowing is to be equated with not discriminating. Young people who say the *buraku* problem does not concern them, or has nothing to do with them, may quickly switch to stereotyped negative responses on hearing rumors about the *hisabetsu buraku* issue when parents, relatives, or peers express negative views.<sup>14</sup>

There are several reasons why the awareness of the *buraku* issue is declining. First, as I mentioned in the previous chapter borrowing Kenji Nakagami's words, the *buraku* problem has become less visible recently due to the fact that the Dōwa Special Measures led to improved living conditions in *buraku* areas and as a result the gap between *buraku* and non-*buraku* areas has narrowed. At the same time, the incidence of workplace discrimination has diminished thanks to the earlier-mentioned cases such as *buraku chimei sōkan*.<sup>15</sup>

Second, the problem is no longer strictly approached as a *buraku* problem, because actual living conditions have changed. Now the *buraku* problem increasingly tends to be viewed within the broader narrative of human rights. As a result, unlike in the past, nowadays the *buraku* issue receives less direct attention.

Consider the survey. It showed a higher level of awareness of the *buraku* problem among people in their forties and fifties, groups that were exposed to school and workplace courses in *dōwa* education.

Unsurprisingly, since the March 2002 termination of the Law on Special Measures, the use of the word *dōwa* has almost completely disappeared. Leaving aside the question of whether this is a desirable development or not. The clearest evidence of the trend is the removal of the word *dōwa* in 2009 from the National Research Council for Dōwa Education, which was established in 1953. Another example is the Ōsaka Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute, which became the Buraku Liberation Research Institute in 1974 carrying out projects on the national level. In 1998 it kept the word *buraku* but added Human

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<sup>14</sup> Kurokawa 2013.

<sup>15</sup> *Buraku chimei sōkan* are lists of *buraku* areas. Certain companies were exposed having these lists presumably to identify job applicants who come from *buraku* areas. Negative publicity and illegality of this practice made companies more careful about discriminatory practices.



Rights back into its name and is now called the Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute.<sup>16</sup>

In 1993, political scientist Takeshi Ishida and social scientist Osamu Mihashi claimed that changing the terminology from “*dōwa*” to “human rights” has led to an avoidance of the *buraku* issue in human rights education and awareness raising activities. They noted that the *buraku* problem has been ignored in the transition.

Osamu Mihashi lamented that “recently anything related to the *buraku* problem or *dōwa* problem doesn’t attract people at all, they’re just not interested. I think that’s why it is becoming more common to see terms such as ‘basic human rights’ or simply ‘human rights issues’ being used by, for example, the local government or any public office when they organize events such as a ‘human rights lecture series.’ I mean, I actually don’t think the focus of these events is on basic human rights issues. They are just using that title, you know”.<sup>17</sup>

## 2 Absorption by general human rights

There are several reasons why the *buraku* problem has become absorbed into the broader issue of human rights. I wrote on this issue in the past,<sup>18</sup> nevertheless, one reason seems to be that, as the *buraku* problem is approaching its resolution, it may not be necessary to continue referring to it by name. On the other hand, to refer to the *buraku* problem specifically by name may give it unnecessary prominence, and counteract efforts to minimize discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

The notion that *buraku* discrimination is about to disappear is reflected in the growing indifference to the *buraku* issue and may assist in satisfying the minds of those who discriminate. A view that talking up the *buraku* issue might make it worse, coupled with general ignorance about the status of the issue may have induced people to become less willing to discuss it.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> While the original name Osaka Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute (Ōsaka Buraku Kaihō Jinken Kenkyūjo) implied human rights for *hisabetsu buraku* people, the new name Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute (Buraku Kaihō – Jinken Kenkyūjo) suggests a partial shift in focus to general human rights.

<sup>17</sup> Ishida/Mihashi 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Kurokawa 2011b.

<sup>19</sup> There is a saying in Japanese “*Neta ko o okosu na.*” Literally, it means “Do not wake a sleeping child” which translates the English saying “Let sleeping dogs lie.” This saying embodies the thinking that the issue will naturally disappear as people stop raising it or talking about it. Buraku Liberation League strongly opposes this way of thinking.

<sup>20</sup> It is in the interest of those who discriminate against *buraku* to keep a low profile and benefit from general indifference to the issue because an openly discriminatory behavior might backfire. For example a demonstration might take place and lead to naming and shaming. General indifference to the issue means the resistance to discrimination is weaker and the

Of course, the tendency to focus on general human rights is not solely negative. The *buraku* liberation movement benefitted from the fact it became the main focus of the international movement against discrimination in Japan in the early 1980s. This made the issue more open to discussion. It was an important and meaningful development as it led to a broader definition of *buraku* issues by setting them in the wider context of human rights.

On the other hand, I am afraid we have not learned from our mistakes. The idea of giving our attention to general human rights sounds very attractive but the lessons of history should remind us that the human rights of particular minority groups can be lost, even trampled on, by nationalist sloganeering. This is what happened in wartime Japan when the slogan of One Nation<sup>21</sup> led to a dismissal of human rights for a number of disadvantaged groups.

Kei'ichi Fujita's work *Thoughts on Why the Dōwa Problem is Scary: A Critique of Chitaikyō*<sup>22</sup> was critical of the *buraku* liberation movement and the *dōwa* administration. In discussion with Masanao Kano, Fujita observed:

If I should comment on the relation between the *buraku* problem and various other human rights issues, I cannot deny that there is a tendency to view it as a 'universal, people's problem'. What is important, though, is whether these issues resonate with people to contribute to the growing and deepening of feelings such as sympathy and sense of togetherness. In other words, we have to ask ourselves whether the issues are successful at nurturing the empathy for the suffering, sadness, anxieties and pain of those considered as minorities and people pushed to the margins of society.<sup>23</sup>

This is a crucial point.

The gradual improvement of living conditions for *hisabetsu buraku*, and the reduced visibility of discrimination have led to *buraku* "pride" becoming marginalized. Negative talk about the lives and living situations of *hisabetsu buraku* promotes an unfavorable image of them among non-*buraku* people, and could revive prejudice and discrimination. Whenever discussion of

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discriminator is stronger. As for the legality of hate speech, in 2016 a controversial anti-hate speech law was passed by the Diet. It has, however, been criticized as rather ineffective.

<sup>21</sup> This slogan was popular with some leaders of the prewar *buraku* improvement movement called the *yūwa* (reconciliation) movement that was backed and strongly influenced by the government. The slogan can be interpreted as a call for loyalty to the Emperor and interests of the nation. *Suiheisha* opposed the ideas of assimilation and self-improvement upheld by the *yūwa* movement.

<sup>22</sup> Fujita 1987.

Chitaikyō stands for Chiiki Kaizen Taisaku Kyōgikai (Consultative Committee for Measures related to Regional Improvement). It was a governmental body responsible for, among other things, identifying *buraku* areas in need of improvement of housing and infrastructure.

<sup>23</sup> Kano/Fujita 2008.



*hisabetsu buraku* is preoccupied with the miserable or pitiful aspects of their lives, this limits their opportunity of gaining and commanding self-respect.

From a pedagogical point of view, it might be easier for teachers to focus on the positive aspects of *hisabetsu buraku* rather than risk unpleasant reactions to mentioning the negative side. However, this positive interpretation, which might mention distinctive elements of their traditional arts, foods, and relational ties, may not resolve “the *buraku* background wall” that still confronts many *hisabetsu buraku* people. And if the debate avoids mention of poverty and discrimination, it would work against the original objective of increasing awareness of the *buraku* issue, and might lead to further misunderstanding of the *buraku* problem.

Kenji Nakagami gives an example of how a positivist approach can be misleading. He notes that the term *roji*, or street people, originally had negative connotations as it included people such as pimps or thieves. This means that when we speak about *roji* in positive terms even today, it can be misleading. He considers the move towards giving the term *roji* positive associations is also a form of demagoguery – and this has permeated the stance of *dōwa* education and the Buraku Liberation League. In other words, by insisting on a positive interpretation of themselves as good, virtuous people, actually made *roji* appear weaker and contributed to their disappearance.<sup>24</sup>

Nakagami was able to speak this way with authority because he was an insider to the *roji* and could observe and speak about its complexity. We can conclude that the romanticized, easily told story of *pride* has been used to eliminate the *buraku* problem.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, looking at outsiders to the *buraku* issue, there seems to be no end to the neo-racism that Sakai<sup>26</sup> describes, with proponents of the standing of Shinzō Abe,<sup>27</sup> Tarō Aso,<sup>28</sup> and other conservative politicians resorting to hate speech or inappropriate comments about the issue of comfort women.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Gan Tanigawa, Taishō Gōdōtai to Roji no Ronri “Purazuma Zōkei” o megutte, in: “Purazuma no Zōkei – 60 Nendai Ronsō Hoi”, September 1984, quoted after Nakagami 1995–1999, vol. 2.

Street people needed to be viewed as strong but the suggestion that they were virtuous diminished the notion that they were strong.

<sup>25</sup> By insider, Kurokawa means that Nakagami was of buraku origin. Kurokawa is saying the buraku problem cannot be solved by an idealism that only considers the positive.

<sup>26</sup> Sakai 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Shinzō Abe is the current Prime Minister of Japan.

<sup>28</sup> Tarō Aso is a long-serving LDP politician, currently holding the post of the Minister of Finance. He has a reputation for making controversial statements.

<sup>29</sup> The term “comfort women” is essentially a translation of the Japanese term *ianfu*. The term refers to women of mainly Korean and Chinese origin who served as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers in occupied territories during the World War Two. The numbers of these women and level of enforcement are until today a source of dispute especially between Japan and South

Memories fade, but in 2003<sup>30</sup> Aso made the following comment about Hiromu Nonaka<sup>31</sup>: “somebody like Nonaka who comes from a *buraku* can’t become the Prime Minister of Japan.” Nonaka reported that Aso used these words in a meeting of the executive council of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).<sup>32</sup> Some years later, on October 26, 2011 issue of the weekly magazine *Shūkan Asahi* published a feature story on Tōru Hashimoto,<sup>33</sup> Mayor of Ōsaka, in which his *buraku* background was revealed<sup>34</sup> (*Buraku Kaihō*, 2013; Miyazaki/Kobayashi, 2012).

These examples are the tip of the iceberg and they show that discriminatory beliefs against *hisabetsu buraku* still exist in the Japanese society.

### 3 Retreat of the Hisabetsu Buraku story

When I, as a university professor, encounter students who do not know the *buraku* problem, I always try to tell them at least a little about the current situation. When we watch movies in class such as *People’s Town: Ōsaka Hisabetsu Buraku* (*Ningen no Machi – Ōsaka Hisabetsu Buraku*) (1986) or *Family: Living Through Buraku Discrimination* (*Kazoku – Buraku Sabetsu wo Ikiru*) (1988),<sup>35</sup> they usually request to see something recent. However, I cannot

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Korea. The Japanese and South Korean governments concluded an agreement in December 2015 that should solve the issue by creating a 1-billion-yen fund for the victims.

**30** Nonaka said in a discussion with Sugo Shin that Aso had made that comment at a Taiyūkai (Self-Defense Forces Friendship Association) meeting on March 3, 2001 (Nonaka/Shin, 2009).

**31** Hiromu Nonaka is a former Japanese politician of *buraku* descent who was born in Kyoto in 1925. He was holding several important posts during his long political career such a member of the Lower House of the Japanese Parliament, Minister of Home Affairs and Chief Cabinet Secretary in the 1990s. Aso did not admit to the comment about Nonaka but despite that it attracted attention of media even outside Japan.

**32** Uozumi 2004.

**33** Tōru Hashimoto is a Japanese politician who served as governor of Osaka prefecture and mayor of Osaka city until 2015. Especially during his office terms he ranked as one of the most popular Japanese politicians on the national level. Since he lost in a referendum on his Osaka policies in 2015, his political career has stalled and he is currently not active. Hashimoto often appeared in the media even before he became a politician as his original profession was a lawyer. His outspoken style made him a very controversial persona after his insensitive comments on labor unions, comfort women, US soldiers and his hard stance on public employees with tattoos.

**34** The *Shūkan Asahi* story revealed Hashimoto’s place of birth, which was considered discriminatory behavior. The tone of the story also showed contempt for the mayor because of his origins. The president of the Asahi Shimbun Publications Inc. eventually accepted responsibility for the story and resigned.

**35** Both movies are documentaries produced by Buraku Liberation Research Institute and directed by Masato Koike. *Ningen no Machi*, *Ōsaka: Hisabetsu Buraku* gives an account of

really think of any new documentary film similar to those I just mentioned. But I do introduce them to *Tale of a Butcher Shop* (*Aru Seinikuten no Hanashi*) the 2013 movie directed by Aya Hanabusa. The story of the movie centers around a butcher's family of the Kitades and their small shop in Kaizuka outside Ōsaka named Kitade Butcher Shop. The family is involved in the whole chain of operations from raising and slaughtering cows to retail. The movie essentially depicts the routine manual work of their last slaughter because the municipal slaughter house the family uses is about to be closed down. ('To Eat' Means 'to Live' – The Movie 'Tale of a Butcher Shop', Interview with Aya Hanabusa, *Tokyo Jinken*, No. 61, Spring 2014).

The story is introduced in the article like this. When the four generations of the family get together for dinner, it always gets busy and noisy. This is the family's seventh generation of butchers but what occupies the minds of the sons is their father's experience of discrimination because of his *hisabetsu buraku* origin. They want a society without any discrimination and so they join the BLL with their local friends. Before they know it, their minds change and the community and the family change too. It is "a documentary of a family who continue to face the value of life" (*Tale of a Butcher Shop*, <http://www.seinikuten-eiga.com>).

Unlike the first two movies I mentioned, this movie relegates the *buraku* issue to the background. Director Hanabusa explains it was difficult to depict discrimination. She says that (Interview with Aya Hanabusa):

First of all you must be there right when it happens and this was basically never the case because there was always a camera around. Second, the question is whether to capture it on camera is helpful at all. (part omitted) My initial premise was not that there is an issue or a problem. I just made a movie about people who possess great skill, who pass it from one generation to another and who still share strong ties within their community until today. I actually wanted to make a movie that would question prejudice and discrimination against people who work with meat.

Naturally, if you look at the life story of the Kitade Family more closely, you are bound to encounter the problem of *buraku* discrimination. When Hanabusa went to the slaughter house she realized that, in her own words, "thanks to this kind of work, I can eat every day – and it is so wrong that people are prejudiced and discriminate just because they do not know about this work." By her movie Hanabusa primarily challenges "discrimination against the work at the slaughterhouse." In the interview, Hanabusa describes how she discussed the idea of

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various aspects of discrimination experienced by buraku people. *Kazoku – Buraku Sabetsu wo Ikiru* is a short movie that deals with the issue of marriage discrimination.

making a movie with the people involved, and they told her to “portray the reality in the community accurately.”

People who agreed to be in the movie told Hanabusa: “Maybe you don’t really understand the issues, but at least the movie will show what you tried to learn about it. And you don’t seem to be a person who gives up easily.” Hanabusa had to learn much more about the *buraku* problem in order to make a meaningful film about the slaughter house.

As reported in the newspapers, Rikkyō University student Satoshi Hashiguchi presented the movie at the Tama City Film Festival.<sup>36</sup> His introduction focused on the problem of discrimination against people in the meat industry, without mentioning the *buraku* issue. He expressed his own opinion (*Asahi Shimbun*, May 3, 2014):

There are many kinds of discrimination in the world and they all have deep-rooted causes. But once we abandon the effort to learn about them, any improvement will become difficult. After I saw the movie, I came to like meat even more.

Hashiguchi’s words communicate a wish that the movie serve as an opportunity for young people to think about discrimination – as meat is connected with daily routines that young people can relate to.

The tendency to sideline the *buraku* problem can be traced back to the 1992 remake of the movie *The River with No Bridge* (*Hashi no nai Kawa*) directed by Yoichi Higashi. The movie poster advertises it as a “twentieth century epic poem of the spirit penetrating modern Japan” illustrated by the line: “Falling in love made their hearts glow with happiness.” This seems to present a one-sided interpretation of the movie as a love story in which the *buraku* problem was almost completely moved into the background.<sup>37</sup>

*The Millennial Rapture*, a film based on the Kenji Nakagami novel *A Thousand Years of Pleasure* (*Sennen no Yuraku*) and directed by Kōji Wakamatsu, was released in 2013.<sup>38</sup> This was less than a year before the release of *Tale of a Butcher Shop*, and it is interesting to note the similarities.

The introduction section of the web site for *A Thousand Years of Pleasure* says it is about “living a life on the streets of Kishū,” which gives no indication that the movie concerns *hisabetsu buraku* (<http://www.wakamatsukoji.org/sennennoyuraku/index01.html>).

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<sup>36</sup> In the year 2014.

<sup>37</sup> See Kurokawa 2011a.

<sup>38</sup> The movie title translates into English as *The Millennial Rapture* but the name *A Thousand Years of Pleasure* is used in this translation to correspond to the name of the novel by Nakagami. The original novel is also sometimes titled in English as *The Thousand Years of Happiness* or *The Joy of a Thousand Years*.

It is not that the movie attempts to conceal its connection with *hisabetsu buraku*. In a booklet released with the movie titled *A Thousand Years of Pleasure*, the director's introduction is followed by a chapter by Takayuki Kan *The Background of 'Roji': Street People*, which gives a detailed explanation of the *buraku* issue.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, there are only a few lines in the movie that concern the *buraku* issue. Looking at screenwriter Mari Ide's chapter *Complete Script*, we can find only the following lines. At the moment when Hanzō is born, for instance, Reijo and Hikonosuke have a conversation in which Reijo says: "So noble, yet at the same time, so polluted." Later in the movie, Miyoshi says: "We are street people and even the fishermen avoid us." At another point, Reijo says: "Miyoshi, too, now rests in peace only so he could clean the pollution." And finally, "Nakamoto family's men, noble but inheriting polluted blood." The song at the end of the movie has the lyrics: "*Banbai, banbai*/welcome the era of Meiji/voices calling for the equality of all people/I can't read the characters *banzai*/I don't even know its meaning/I just shout *banbai banbai*/but they spit at me, set my house on fire and pierce me with a spear."<sup>40</sup>

To those who understand the theme of Nakagami's work, it is easy to see that the background to the movie is the *buraku* issue. As understanding of the issue varies, however, it is fair to ask how much the average viewer really understands. It seems, in the end, that the *buraku* issue was avoided, perhaps deliberately!

There is also an interview in the movie booklet with Sōsuke Takaoka, the actor born in 1982, who played Miyoshi in the movie. When asked: "How do you view the underlying issue of discrimination in this movie?" Takaoka answers (section *Onerous Destiny and Instant Flame, Sennen no Yuraku*):

Well, I personally think it is an issue of your destiny, you know. How do you view your destiny? You want to escape it but you can't. It is not primarily a movie about *hisabetsu*. If you would like to think about it in terms of discrimination, the question then is what is actually discrimination? If you have 10 people, they all have different ways of thinking. If you have only two people, they can exchange opinions on an equal basis, but as the number increases, in the end you will create minorities and start excluding them. And that is discrimination. The idea of excluding those who are different, those you cannot relate to, is, so to speak, discrimination.

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<sup>39</sup> Wakamatsu 2013.

<sup>40</sup> The words "equality of all people" refer to the 1871 *Kaihōrei* (Emancipation Edict) that abolished class differences, and formally declared the former lowest castes *Eta* and *Hinin* as equal to the rest of society. Kurokawa writes on page 228 of the book the word *banzai* (meaning Cheer! or Long live!) came to be used at the time of the promulgation of the Meiji constitution (1890). *Banbai* is a mispronunciation of the word *banzai*.



It is easy to be critical of such statements. Even before questioning Takaoka's leisurely approach to what is discrimination, which is the background to this movie, we need to realize the author of the novel on which the movie was based Kenji Nakagami himself suffered from discrimination he could not escape. It cannot be denied that many people, especially young people, share Takaoka's way of thinking. And that is why it has to be confronted! Leaving aside the question whether the authors' real main message was to present either *Tale of a Butcher Shop* as a story of discrimination against slaughter house workers, or *A Thousand Years of Pleasure* as a story of *buraku* discrimination (where *roji*, "the street" stands for "Japan"), we can see a move towards the gradual disappearance and eventual elimination of the hisabetsu *buraku* story. This is precisely why the *buraku* issue is now becoming less visible and more difficult to comprehend.

Approaches to bring the issue of discrimination closer can be viewed as a strategy to solve the discrimination problem, even if only marginally. I realize that these stories might shake prejudice against *hisabetsu buraku* and inspire readers and viewers, but I still wonder if it is a good approach to abandon the more direct, head-on way of fighting *buraku* discrimination.

Recently, there has emerged a tendency to portray so-called "new *burakumin*", comprising people who did not benefit from the *dōwa* program like the previous generation. The catchy term "new *burakumin*" appears in books like *The Hisabetsu Buraku Youth* (1999) by Kadooka, *Interview: 12 people of buraku origin speak of their now and tomorrow* (2003) by Kaihō Shuppansha, and *Youth Facing the Buraku Problem* (2014) by Uchida.

One of the people appearing in these books is Yūko Motoe, born in 1980, from Daiki town, Watarai-gun, Mie Prefecture. When she was in her second year of junior high school, the Civics teacher came to her house because her class were learning about the *buraku* issue. After the visit, she learned from her parents for the first time that they live in a hisabetsu *buraku* area. After graduation, the high school introduced her to a company hoping she could get work, but they did not hire her because she was from a *dōwa* district. After she finished school, she started dating, but when they talked about marriage two years later, her boyfriend's mother was against it. Motoe thought: "We'd better break up then. But next time I go out with somebody, it will probably happen again. What's the point of my life?" and she mindlessly cut her wrists. Fortunately, her family was nearby and prevented a tragedy.

In a similar case, a classmate from the same district experienced similar reactions when her boyfriend's parents told her: "You come from *buraku*, your



blood is green.<sup>41</sup> No way will I allow that marriage.” So they had to scrap their wedding plans (Yūko Motoe, “I Wish I Had Known Earlier”<sup>42</sup>). Such discrimination stubbornly persists until today.

Kenji Nakagami portrayed the gradual disappearance of the *buraku* issue in a Japan where the axis of the country is the emperor.<sup>43</sup>

It may be more accurate to describe Nakagami’s work as dream rather than reality, but he must have been aware of this. He was a novelist and simply had to write it the way he did. In any case, I still think we have no choice other than to relentlessly keep demanding the end to *buraku* discrimination. That means nothing less than being aware there is no place for discrimination towards anyone outside the group we belong to, in other words, outside our own personal interests. We must long for universal human rights as a means to stand against discrimination.

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<sup>41</sup> Especially in the past, the former lowest castes *eta* and *hinin* were often described as non-human with bodies different from humans. This led to the belief that buraku people have green blood. Another part of the mythology was that buraku people give birth to mentally and physically handicapped children. This prejudicial thinking is less common nowadays but it would be unrealistic to claim that it does not exist at all. For explanation of the concept of pollution that is related to these beliefs see, for example, Brooks 1976.

<sup>42</sup> Uchida 2014.

<sup>43</sup> In her book, Kurokawa explains Nakagami’s complicated view of the Emperor, which is described as a love-hate relationship.

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**Note:** For more on the lurking discrimination in the “civil society” please see Kurokawa 2013.

