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Fighting fire with fire:

The Buraku Liberation League and the Buraku Master Narrative in the fight for human rights

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## Abstract

This thesis offers an insight into the hardships of Japan's largest minority group, the Burakumin. Whilst the generally accepted explanation for their social ostracism is that they are descendants of Japan's former feudal outcaste community, this narrative, when held up to the light, contains sporadic, ambiguous and unempirical building blocks. All the same, it remains the master narrative in most of the discussion, even in those who are inherently victimized by it and those who wish to end this discrimination, such as Buraku activist groups. What this thesis will attempt to research then, is in how far this Buraku master narrative influences Buraku self-identity and the possible solutions to the Buraku issue.

*Keywords:* Japan, discrimination, Burakumin, self-identity, human rights, Buraku Liberation League, Master narrative

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

To this day, discrimination remains a serious and widespread problem. It exists everywhere and at every level of society and, in contrast with what it entails, not a single group of people is exempt from excluding or viewing other people negatively for whatever reason. In Japan, around three million people have to face discrimination and prejudice on a regular basis, all the while not differing from the ‘mainstream’ population linguistically, racially, or nationally speaking. They are generally referred to as ‘Burakumin’ and the reason they are excluded from the majority group of Japanese is based on a genealogical idea: namely, that they are descendants of Japan’s former feudal outcaste community.<sup>1</sup>

The main problem is that discrimination in Japan is not merely institutionalized, but very much ingrained in people’s mind-sets. Alistair McLauchlan writes in an article from 2002 that:

Japanese people’s belief in their own special qualities and homogeneity – supported by official denials of the existence of Japanese minority groups – has meant that mainstream society has continued to embrace and rationalize the concept of a separate Japanese ‘race’ and its attendant in-group/out-group thinking. This style of thinking includes the rejection of the *burakujūmin* because of the predominance among many Japanese to equate ethnicity with race, or in other words, people who do not fit the classic Japanese self-image can be rejected as non-Japanese (p. 89).

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘Burakumin’ is generally considered to be offensive in Japanese society – it might even be compared with the word ‘nigger’, which evokes a similar reaction in Western society as ‘Burakumin’ does in Japan. Usually the more politically correct terms *Buraku jūmin* (“Buraku resident”), *Buraku shushinsha* (“people of Buraku origin”), *Hisabetsumin* (“people who are discriminated against”) or *dōwa* (“assimilated”) are preferred (McLauchlan 2003, p. 1). However, ‘Burakumin’ is the most well-known term in English, and also the term that is generally used in Western academia, which is why it will be used here (albeit with some reservations).

This is not to say that a 'need' for an outcaste group is a conscious one, nor that ostracism is a decidedly Japanese phenomenon. Yet it is so deeply rooted in society, many Japanese still grow uncomfortable as soon as the words 'multi-ethnic society' are mentioned. Frank Upham (1987), who discusses a 1965 Report on the state of Buraku areas made by a government-sponsored research institute, phrases it as follows:

[The report] showed Buraku discrimination to be deeply rooted in Japanese society, a society which the Report saw as still premodern in many respects, where individual freedom of action is often shackled by irrational and superstitious traditions, customs, and beliefs, and where feudal concepts of social status, family background, and group orientation are still the basis of social order (p. 85).

As such, Buraku discrimination is not simply owing to their supposed inferior and abnormal status, but because an outcaste group such as them is 'necessary' for society to function the way it has for a long time. This is a deeply rooted problem that lies at the heart of what it means to be (seen as) Burakumin.

Although some sources claim that Buraku history has its roots in Korean or otherwise foreign ancestry, a justification, both Upham and McLauchlan (2003) claim, used in order to facilitate the rejection of the group, Burakumin are generally full-blood Japanese (Upham p. 84; McLauchlan p. 4). The only thing that Burakumin do not have in common with mainstream Japanese, then, is that the former group is being discriminated against by the latter. In this sense, Burakumin neither completely belong to the 'ordinary' minority group of non-Japanese, nor are they accepted by the people who are inherently the same as they are. This also means that their being a social minority is primarily based on the fact that mainstream Japanese treat them as such. Thus in comparison with other minorities in Japan such as the Ainu and Zainichi Koreans, who have their own distinctive culture to fall back on,

the Buraku culture and history is constructed around the discrimination that exists against them due to their so-called ‘untouchability’.

Yet, Burakumin “are not simply products of a history of discrimination” (Amos p. 15): They belong to and strongly identify with this community as a person. There are ideational aspects to the Buraku Issue that form it into much more than just a remnant of the past that needs to be dealt with. This makes the Buraku Issue not only a highly important domestic affair, but also a controversial one. The modern policy of ‘Neta Ko Wo Okosuna’ (“Don’t Wake Up a Sleeping Baby”) or the ‘Bury-one’s-head-in-the-sand’-strategy has firmly taken root in Japanese society: If one does not talk about the problem, it will be resolved and/or cease to exist. It is for this reason that one does not mention this subject when in polite company, since any mention of it makes people aware of the existence of Burakumin (that is, of their differing from ‘ordinary’ Japanese) and thus may count as an act of discrimination in itself. This is at least partially why awareness of the Buraku Problem is not widespread outside of Japan, and even nationally speaking there are areas in Japan where people have little idea of what entails the Buraku issue, let alone that such a group (still) exists. If a Japanese person seems unaware that discrimination against Burakumin is still a problem, it is generally not out of spite but out of genuine ignorance.<sup>2</sup> Many Burakumin themselves usually do not attempt to break this taboo on their own existence, since many of them try to pass as ‘normal’ in everyday life in order to find a job, to buy a house, or to marry.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In this light, what might be interesting to mention is that it is virtually unknown that the famous writer Mishima Yukio was of Buraku lineage, from his father’s side – Mishima himself had never made it a public issue, nor do secondary sources mention it. It is only sporadically touched upon by other Buraku writers such as Nakagami Kenji, but it seems as if they are hardly taken seriously by Japanese media. Source: 1989 interview with Nakagami Kenji, by Gerard Meudal: <http://www.campin.me.uk/Politics/nakagami.html>

<sup>3</sup> An elderly lady in Mikisio Hane (1982) was quoted as saying: “I feel that activities against discrimination in this Buraku should be carried on quietly. But we mustn’t do anything that will arouse sleeping dogs. We should not broadcast the fact that we belong to the Buraku. We’ll end up disgracing ourselves” (pp. 162-63).

This does not mean, however, that all of them remain silent. For some it is a painful issue to be denied a Buraku identity, since it is who they are. Especially during the post-war years, when the reformist breeze greatly influenced the political climate, several Buraku leaders stepped up against discriminatory acts, led by the *Buraku Liberation League* (henceforth referred to as the BLL). While this group does not represent all Burakumin it is one of the largest Buraku activist groups and their political influence, especially during the post-war period, should not be underestimated. The BLL also holds a great amount of control over the public discourse on the Buraku problems. They are infamous for rather aggressive techniques and public reactions that they applied in the early beginnings of their group, such as public shamings of alleged discriminators against Burakumin. However, this has created apprehension amongst mainstream Japanese to say anything that has remotely to do with the Buraku issue.<sup>4</sup> This makes any academic discussion on the subject quite difficult for scholars in Japan, and while there do exist some articles, they are mostly neutral and only touch the surface and/or are written by persons affiliated with the BLL or other Buraku activist groups.

As a result, the discourse on Burakumin has remained largely the same – however, this narrative, wherein the Burakumin are represented as a homogenous community with a history that goes back to medieval outcaste lineage, can be challenged. This so-called Buraku Master Narrative has questionable foundations at best, yet has successfully attached itself to people from Buraku areas ever since modernity in the form of the Meiji Period arrived. Yet, despite the grievances it must have caused for many a Burakumin who tried to look for employment or a spouse beyond the borders of the Buraku communities, the Buraku Master Narrative can be found back, in no small amounts, in BLL rhetoric as well. Since quite recently Buraku activist groups have even begun to speak of the Buraku Issue as a human rights issue, no longer bound to national borders but something that remains a worldwide problem. The

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<sup>4</sup> A famous example, the van Wolferen-case, will be explored in the fifth section.



manner in which Buraku Master Narrative is used and sometimes contradicts their discourse betrays the fact that it might even be considered a sort of necessary evil, a formerly degrading discourse now used as a weapon against itself.

What this thesis will attempt to answer, then, is if there is a solution to the Buraku Issue that - on the long term - might bring possible success, what this 'success' might entail for the different groups involved, and what kind of role the Buraku master narrative has in these solutions. A deeper zoom-in as to why certain activist groups such as the BLL seem to buy into the Buraku Master Narrative, even though it also plays an intrinsic role in the reason why they are discriminated against in the first place, will be attempted. Although there is no singular answer possible, and it must never be assumed that the narrative of Buraku activist groups is the way it is due to calculated and conscious decisions made by these groups, it is the goal of this thesis to shed some light on the Buraku issue and the difficulties Burakumin have to face on a daily basis. By critically looking at the Buraku Master Narrative and BLL rhetoric, a deeper understanding of discrimination in general, possible solutions and what human rights can mean might be developed.

This thesis is divided into six main sections. The first section comprises the introduction. The second section provides an overview of Buraku history and -discrimination. The third section zooms in on who the modern Burakumin are and explores the Buraku self-perspective. The fourth section expands on this self-perspective and analyses the Buraku Master Narrative. In the fifth section, the modern-day Buraku Liberation League, their tactics and their rhetoric will be looked at and the switch from 'Buraku rights' to 'human rights' that occurred in the 90s will be analysed. Finally, the sixth section will highlight the most important points and discoveries that were brought forward in the previous sections, and pose a conclusion.

## Chapter 2 – A Buraku History

The origins of the group of people who nowadays are known by the name ‘Burakumin’ are blurry at best. McLauchlan ascribes the main turning point in the forming of Japanese society to the arrival of Buddhism in Japan, around the seventh century A. D. Death was, according to Ebihara Isao (2012), already viewed as a curse and something impure in the then-primitive version of Shintoism, the Afterlife being something dark and sinister, regardless of one’s conduct before death: Buddhism, then, introduced the much more appealing idea of karma – “the ethical behavior or moral conduct during the current life determines the well being in the next life” (23). McLauchlan concurs, stating that both dogmas “helped separate Japanese society into two broad streams, the socially acceptable *ryōmin* (good people) and the socially undesirable *senmin* (base people)” (p. i). These people were ostracized by society and usually formed a community of their own in subsections of a village or even farther away, often in barren land or areas prone to flooding. McLauchlan further comments that “...wide-ranging regulations ensured that the outcastes were shunned wherever possible” (p. 33)

Over time, this group of ‘undesirables’ became further divided into two distinct categories, the spiritually polluted *Eta* (“much filth”) or those who were in some way or another involved with death, and the lesser despised *Hinin* (“non-human”), which mostly consisted of (ex-) criminals, prostitutes, lepers and beggars. Since Shinto as well as Buddhism considered the act of taking life and handling (dead) flesh as something vile and dirty, the people who were involved in such socially polluting tasks, such as butchers, undertakers, executioners and tanners, came to be regarded as unclean, impure and inhuman.<sup>5</sup> It was

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<sup>5</sup> It must be mentioned, though, that Japan was not an exception in seeing the tanning-profession as odoriferous – in fact, most of the ancient world already considered tanners to be dirty and a profession mostly restricted to the

therefore, McLauchlan remarks, especially difficult for eta to partake in society as they were thought of as untouchable and therefore as to be avoided; hinin, in contrast, might have been of lowly status as well but could erase this by, for example, paying a financial penance or doing menial labour for villagers – Eta had few such options (p. 2). Yet, Timothy D. Amos (2011) argues, in the few records about outcastes that still remain, it also becomes clear that the boundaries between outcaste and non-outcaste were quite fluid: there are many recorded instances of “people from all backgrounds moving in and out of the [Outcaste] community” (p. 13). Outcaste communities were, therefore, not as uniform as is now generally believed. It was not until the Meiji period that these outcastes, however, became exclusively categorized as ‘Burakumin’ and turned into a (loosely defined) community of their own. Thus, although it is generally accepted that both eta and hinin form the ancestral roots of the group that is now called Burakumin, it would probably not be a stretch to say that the original outcastes came from a much wider group of people than just these two.

### *2.1) Tokugawa period (1600-1868): Underclass or Outside class?*

The widely variable group called ‘Outcastes’ became singled out during the Edo period, when the feudal Tokugawa regime institutionalized a hierarchical status system and filed all outcastes under one category. Social status had now become frozen and all of the outcaste groups, including eta, were classified into one group as the lowest members of society, the ‘underclass’, beneath the so-called ‘four categories of the people’ of samurai, peasants, artisans and merchants. Many scholars agree that this is the point where discrimination became officially institutionalized and thus, as Ian Neary puts it in his

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poor, something which remains to be observed today in the often remote locations of tanning industries. Source: Personal conversation with Prof. Dr. Matthi Forrer, 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2014.

publication on human rights, "...a way of life" (2002, p. 36).<sup>6</sup> Since the Tokugawa period was one wherein social instability was perceived to constantly threaten public order and morality and thus Tokugawa rule, Amos remarks that many restrictions and regulations were created so as to maintain order; categorization and segregation, therefore, were fundamental and restrictions were placed on "movement, residence, occupational change, ... marriage [and even] clothing and hairstyles" in order to maintain the status quo (pp. 40-41). Furthermore, since social status had become frozen, it had subsequently become hereditary as well as "hereditary systems of succession were institutionalized" (p. 3). Around the mid-eighteenth century, mostly through legal measures, outcastes were forced to do certain jobs and live in certain places, and their descendants were to do the same. Finally, Amos writes, commoners were encouraged to be content with their place in society and the outcastes were often used as a lightning rod for any flash of civil unrest amongst the poorer segment of feudal society since their social status, and therefore untouchability, was now permanent (p. 42). An often-quoted rule of that time was that an eta life was only worth one-seventh of a commoner's (Amos p. 43; Hane p. 142). By utilizing a "divide and conquer ... strategy towards commoners" and turning a blind eye to the plights of the outcastes, the government was able to maintain relative peace (Amos p. 81).

There are some scholars who disagree with the historical model of four-classes-plus-one-underclass, though. Uesugi Satoshi and Fujisato Akira claim that this kind of model is nowhere to be found in historical records dating from the Tokugawa period: rather, they say, it is a misapplication of the Chinese feudal system to the Japanese one. Uesugi and Fujisato argue that instead, eta lived as free individuals beyond the social borders instead of below them, forming an 'outclass' instead of an 'underclass'. Rather than comprising the lowest part

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<sup>6</sup> An example of this viewpoint can be found at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, in a lecture by professor Ohno Kenichi published in his book *The Economic Development of Japan* (2006): [http://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/oono/hp/lecture\\_J/qa02.htm](http://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/oono/hp/lecture_J/qa02.htm)

of a single pyramid schematic then, the eta had their own separate pyramid. Amos adds to this theory, saying that as segregation was largely based on occupation, every member of society was expected to undertake the duties pertained to their own class. The outcastes were no different, generally obliged to do the dirty work: leatherwork, disposal of animal carcasses and human remains, sandal-making, guard- and execution duties, etc. With the latter, the Tokugawa regime effectively made the outcastes their “punitive arm” and thus allowed them special powers (Amos pp. 42, 85). In addition, Amos takes note that numerous records exist of movement in and out of outcaste communities and since these were often not included in land surveys and other official instances, this and Amos’ claim that “there was no ‘natural’ way of distinguishing between ‘commoner’ ... and ‘outcaste’ ... in everyday life [due to constantly reproduced shogunate legislations]” suggests that the presumed uniformity of these areas may be contested (pp. 13, 83).

Then there is also the fact that while there was a form of centralized government, with the shogun (lit: ‘general’) as de facto ruler, other daimyō or lords held a considerable degree of freedom in their own regions. As such, Ian Neary (2002) maintains, “there was a great deal of variation across the country affecting the degree of prejudice encountered by members of [the outcaste] communities, the occupations they were identified with [and] the names used to describe them ...” (p. 36). This meant that discrimination towards members of the outcaste community was not only not universal, the people who were discriminated in place A might not have encountered the same (amount of) prejudice at place B. Amos furthermore mentions that different regions sometimes had different names for certain professions, not all of them (initially) implying a polluted undertone (p. 39). ‘*Kawata*’ for example, meant ‘tanner’ and initially had no additional meaning of impurity, which was added only later (p. 239).

As such, some leaders within outcaste communities were able to attain “considerable wealth and social position”, and particularly the need of the warrior elite for leather products

such as saddles and armour parts often formed close relationships between tanners and members of the elite (Amos pp. 84-87). Since the outcastes had the (obligated) monopoly on these occupations, Amos argues, some outcaste members could in fact be quite wealthy, obtain higher education and even own slaves of their own (p. 91). Uesugi and Fujisato maintain therefore that “Displacement (rather than ranking) was how the outcasts ... were positioned” (in: Mutafchieva 2009, p. 27). The model of 'Underclass', they claim, was only first used during the Meiji period (Mutafchieva, pp. 21-27; Boyle 2012). Whilst these positions did not exactly serve to enhance their social standing in the eyes of the ‘ordinary’ citizens and severe discrimination and poverty were definite problems, to attribute a “universally low social status” to all outcaste members may be somewhat fallacious: in fact, Amos remarks, “self-confidence, and even ‘pride’” may very well have been a part of outcaste identity in Tokugawa times (pp. 87-88). At the very least, the social status of early modern outcaste groups was initially quite ambiguous.

2.2) *Meiji Period (1868-1912): from ‘What one is decides where one lives’ to ‘Where one lives decides what one is’*

With the arrival of the West in Japan, mid-nineteenth century, came the dawn of the Meiji Period. In a need to be seen as both an equal to and independent from the Western powers, the Japanese government adopted several policies that would bring the nation to modernization and enlightenment. As such, Japan needed to transform into a unified and efficient nation, especially being under the watchful eye of the West, which meant that the Tokugawa class-system had now become obsolescent and a remnant of an unenlightened past – something, in short, to be extinguished. This not merely meant the end of the feudal status-system, but a sudden ‘equality for all’ as well. On August 28, 1871, the so-called

'Emancipation Edict' was put into effect, abolishing Outcaste status: the outcaste groups became 'officially liberated' (Amos p. 118). In practice however, much of this turned out to be 'official' only and scarcely any concrete measures were taken to help these former outcastes to attempt to merge back into ordinary society (Amos p. 3; Neary 2002, p. 36). Instead of outcastes, they were now referred to as "new commoners" – a title that was so distinctive still that it soon bore the same stigma as 'outcaste' had done so before. Officially, they were declared free from outcaste status but with the addition of 'new', the figural neon arrow was still pointing towards them (Amos p. 44).

Moreover, the few privileges the outcastes had possessed during the Edo period due to their monopoly in several businesses, vanished after the Tokugawa structures were dismantled by the Meiji government: as such, "the basis for their economic livelihoods" was also lost (Amos p. 128). Everyone who wished to do so, particularly state-owned companies, could now take on these jobs: the 'New Commoners', however, could not quite so easily flock towards other jobs (p. 125). Their new title did not shield them from any discrimination and furthermore, ordinary citizens were quite unsatisfied with this 'emancipation', with economic inequalities remaining but now suddenly no longer officially having a group of undesirables beneath them to act frustrations out on. In his essay "Buraku Culture" Hideo Aoki (2009) argues that "discrimination against the former outcastes has functioned as a lever for social integration in the process of forming a modern Japan" (pp. 185-186): That is, this group served as a lightning rod to keep the ordinary Japanese civilians from directing any frustrations with modernization towards the government, similar to how the Tokugawa regime had utilized the outcaste position to direct the commoner's dissatisfaction away from the elite.

The fact that everyone was 'made equal', then, did not mean that some others were still not 'less equal': Amos mentions that thoughts of 'New Commoners' having "barbaric customs ..., [being] ... diseased and unhygienic ... [and posing] a variety of threats to the

government and the well-being of the general population” eventually turned into the general idea of former outcastes having an essential failure of character, a flaw that inhibited the Japanese nation as a whole in turning into a modernized nation: as such, the former outcastes became the victim of even heavier discrimination (pp. 132-133). Hiroshi Wagatsuma (1967) describes several cases where sporadic riots amongst commoners turned into “eta hunts”, resulting in many casualties (pp. 35-37). Thus, little of the promised liberation became reality as social discrimination against those who were now ‘new commoners’ pressed on. The former outcastes, Amos writes, “became oppressed on all sides” (p. 44). The fact that the Meiji government gained an advantage by presenting the civilians with a black sheep, might have contributed to the historical community forming of Burakumin.

One of the most important means through which this took place is the system of *koseki*. In her dissertation “Buraku Communities and Transformations in Identity in Modern and Contemporary Japan”, Rositsa Mutafchieva (2009) states that during the Meiji Restoration, this family registration system was adopted and emphasis was placed on (original) place of residence, meaning that even if an individual had moved, the place they had lived at originally came to be registered as well (pp. 34-35). Subsequently, people who were or had once been living in what was now increasingly classified as a *Buraku* (部落 – “hamlet”) community were branded Burakumin. Although the term was initially understood as an umbrella term for the slums where the poor lived, these slums were usually those where the former outcastes resided: as such, the term ‘Burakumin’ soon became inseparable from ‘(former) outcaste’ (Amos pp. 136-137). This meant that no matter if their ancestors or they themselves had actually been part of the outcastes or not, residents of Buraku areas became interchangeable with former outcastes (Mutafchieva p. 34; Aoki pp. 192-193). Thus, it was purely due to external factors that many of the people living in these areas became part of the Buraku. The term ‘Burakumin’, meaning “people of the hamlet”, might therefore also show a significant



change of perspective in the way outcastes were viewed, as it puts emphasis on the location of people as opposed to, for example, *eta*, which stresses the socio-cultural aspect of ‘being impure’.

While the newly dubbed “new free citizens” in theory were not legally restricted in their decision to move, the government undertook little action to minimize the social stigma, which was now suddenly highly visible as well. So, it became both practically impossible to ‘pass’ as a mainstream Japanese and be able to get a normal job or rent an apartment since a family registration was now necessary, as well as easier for mainstream society to identify them as being Burakumin, now that only a (former) home address was enough to do so. In practice, Mutafchieva argues, the *koseki*-system made it therefore “...virtually impossible for people residing in Buraku areas to make a living anywhere but within the discriminated community itself” (p. 35). According to Mutafchieva then, the *koseki*-system contributed in a major way to the beginning of a uniform community, since those who began to be referred to as ‘Burakumin’ had little choice but to stay in their designated areas, which were usually little better than slums, and no action was undertaken to actually improve the negative mind-set of mainstream Japanese, resulting more than often in a vicious cycle of poverty, crime, and reinforced prejudice.

### 2.3) *Pre-War period: Soil for grassroots movements*

The forming and modernization of the Japanese nation did not merely bring an outward, upper-level transformation with it, however. Ian Neary (1989), who was among the first Western scholars to take a closer look at Burakumin protests during the pre-war years, points out that in the more liberal climate of the Meiji period the influence of Western concepts such as liberalism, humanism and equality helped to inspire a grass roots mobility that would “contribute to the democratic current ...by spreading liberal and socialist ideas

among the *Buraku* communities” and eventually, after the interruption of WW II, inspire “the formation ... of the post-war liberation movement” (pp. 224-225). Hideo Aoki claims this has been essential to “the survival of [Buraku] culture” into contemporary time, as only the post-war liberation movement was capable, for the first time, of combatting Buraku discrimination without letting Buraku culture disappear (p. 196).

Amos claims that Buraku self-awareness was already growing in the 1910s, with several individuals, specifically the more wealthy members of former outcaste groups, attempting to improve the overall oppressive situation and poor living standards (p. 44). According to Neary, the first real signs of active, nation-wide socio-political organization amongst the Burakumin emerged in the 1920s, among which the rise of *Suiheisha* (1922-1940), the predecessor of the BLL, was probably the most significant since it was one of the first non-governmental-aided organisations of its kind, and also the first that undertook well-planned, public action against those who were accused of discriminating against Burakumin, called *kyūdan* campaigns (p. 10). Neary further explains that, especially during the 1920s, *Suiheisha* was responsible for a growing sense of solidarity amongst the Burakumin in general, and that they thus contributed to this group taking more direct action in opposing discrimination – Burakumin were “...no longer prepared to endure insulting behaviour which they previously had accepted as normal” (pp. 223-224).

Although, according to Neary, demands for governmental help had already emerged in 1905, the Japanese government was slow to take up their responsibility. This rising political mobility and dissatisfaction towards the government and majority society amongst Buraku groups however, forced the Japanese government to take an interest in the Buraku issue. Several government-backed improvement projects called *Yūwa* were set up from 1921 on in order to pacify and keep more radical ideas at bay (Neary, pp. 79, 217-218). Both *Yūwa* and *Suiheisha* competed for the support of people of the Buraku areas, but there was a

fundamental difference in the plan de campagne of the two groups, which proved to be an important factor in the way Buraku organisations would later develop themselves.

Yūwa-activities were mostly centred around the economic improvement of the Buraku areas, and any failure to improve was because the Burakumin themselves “could or would not take advantage of [existing opportunities] because of the attitude they held” (Neary p. 71). So, Yūwa did not focus on the root of the problem, namely the mentality of the Japanese people, but instead on one of the consequences, hereby expecting that ‘cleaning up the place’ in Buraku slums would decrease negative attitude towards Burakumin. Furthermore, the view that the cause of lack of successful improvement was to be found with Burakumin themselves echoes the earlier-stated idea of ‘a lack of character’ within Burakumin that existed amongst ordinary Japanese, and this was exactly the prejudice that Burakumin became tired of.

Suiheisha, then, went further by not only planning to fight “all evidences of discrimination against them in society” but to gain self-awareness and pride as a Burakumin (Amos p. 45). According to Frank Upham (1987), “spontaneity and anger” were the key characteristics of the young men this organisation principally existed of, inspired by Marxism and Christianity (pp. 81-82). On March 3, 1922, Suiheisha’s first conference was held, in which the founding members proposed several points:

- 1 – We, the *Tokushu Burakumin* shall achieve total liberation by our own efforts.
- 2 – We, the *Tokushu Burakumin* demand complete liberty to choose our own occupations as well as economic freedom and we are determined to obtain them.
- 3 – We shall awaken to the fundamental principles of human nature and march towards the perfection of mankind. ... If anyone is insulting to us in either word or deed using such names as *Tokushu Buraku* or *eta* we will thoroughly censure the offenders (From: Neary 1989, pp. 68-69).

In these resolutions, not only a clear rejection of the help of philanthropic movements (such as Yūwa) which only served to “degrade Burakumin” came forward, but also a strong awareness of and pride in the Buraku “forefathers” – the eta and other former outcastes (p. 69). Usage of terms such as eta and *Tokushu buraku* (“Special hamlets”) was to be done proudly by Burakumin themselves since they would “[signify] ... *Buraku* self-awareness”, but should be condemned as discrimination when uttered by non-Burakumin (p. 69). As such, Suiheisha was the first organisation of its kind to not only actively oppose discrimination by means of *kyūdan* campaigns, but also to enforce self-awareness amongst those of the Buraku areas, especially the younger ones, and instil a sense of pride in one’s so-called Buraku heritage. It was this rather new viewpoint that would serve as the basis for upcoming Buraku activist movements, and the subsequent self-identity of many of those they defended.

## Chapter 3 – Who are the Burakumin?

Nowadays, many Burakumin continue to live in areas officially designated as former outcaste settlements. Their living conditions are markedly better than a few decades ago, having significantly improved with the help of governmental funds. This has led some people to believe that the Buraku Issue has been solved. All the same, prejudice towards them has not disappeared. Many problems are still experienced in finding employment, in school- and work environments, marriage, higher education, and generally daily life. In fact, Aoki Hideo (2009) suspects that, when it comes to marriage to non-Burakumin, young Burakumin face more resistance than their parents and even their grandparents have, even though the number of marriages between Burakumin and non-Burakumin has been steadily increasing (pp. 197-198). Yet, while discrimination is thus an on-going problem, despite what some may think, the attitude of many Burakumin is no longer the same as before the pre-war period. Yūwa initiatives had not been so much as successful as they had incited a more vociferous, radical element amongst independent Buraku liberation groups. The seeds that were sown during the pre-war years developed into an attitude that would not only influence the perception of Burakumin themselves, but also that of mainstream society.

### *3.1) The evolution of discrimination*

It was only in the 1960s that the Japanese government took action in order to improve the living standard of people living in Buraku areas, but this was not so much attempting to dissolve prejudice by focusing on the mainstream Japanese, as it was ‘tidying up the place’. George de Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, who did fieldwork in Buraku areas in the sixties, describe the often abysmal living conditions of those residing in Buraku areas, ranging from a low level of education, a very high percentage of families on welfare relief, very little

sanitation, overpopulation, over-crowded, old and dilapidated dwellings, etc. (1967, pp. 121-140). It was only during the late 1970s and 1980s that the conditions in these areas significantly improved, yet the other side of the coin, the prejudice and discrimination, continued to persist. Ian Neary (2002) argues that while the Japanese government has indeed done quite a lot for the Buraku community in the form of financial support and building new houses and other facilities such as hospitals and schools, they have done extremely little to take on the root of the problem, namely the mentality of the Japanese people. In fact, by ‘cleaning up the place’ in Buraku slums, it was expected that this would decrease negative attitude towards Burakumin, as if these slums were a cause and not a consequence: this kind of view closely resembles the same sentiments the Yūwa-projects operated on decades earlier.

Discrimination against them therefore persists even now. Whilst perhaps no longer considered ‘impure’ to the extent they have been in feudal times, the general consensus amongst ordinary Japanese seems to be that Burakumin are generally quite unhygienic, of lesser intelligence, and lazy. While this kind of bigotry is likely based on observations a few decades ago when, according to De Vos and Wagatsuma, most Burakumin lived in unsanitary conditions, suffered from poverty-related illnesses, and many Buraku children scored low on intelligence tests but very high on youth delinquency and truancy, it seems that the prejudice towards Burakumin that resulted from these circumstances still lives on today (pp. 260-270).

Not only that, another, often-mentioned problem that mainstream Japanese have with Burakumin is that they are supposedly “...dangerous, violent, dishonest, and likely to be part of Yakuza”.<sup>7</sup> McLauchlan, who interviewed 21 inhabitants of a Buraku district in Osaka, noticed that there were indeed quite a lot of Yakuza-members living there, but states that while “Indeed, the yakuza do actively recruit disenchanting buraku youth ... and although

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted from personal conversation with a male Japanese university student, Tokyo, November 2011. However, it must be added that the social stigma of being aggressive and dangerous was likely deepened by the sometimes militant and even violent actions by the BLL in the past.

Japan's underworld is one method of leaving one's buraku, it is hardly fair to say that passers are moving into mainstream society by joining gang life" (p. 134). The yakuza do not care for the background their recruits may have, and for a disenchanted, angry young Burakumin, of which McLauchlan noticed there were quite a lot who had an incredibly negative self-image, it is indeed an easy way out of the Buraku (p. 81). Although this is a likely consequence of constant discrimination and not so much a predisposed inclination to violence, to outsiders who have grown up with the idea that Burakumin are aggressive, this assumption will only serve to strengthen the negative image.

There also exists a rather strong sentiment that Burakumin feel unjustifiably entitled to financial help, because "...they continue to make a fuss about their supposedly being discriminated against".<sup>8</sup> McLauchlan also reports a large number of envious remarks made towards Buraku residents about the facilities their neighbourhoods have received ("You [people] are lucky... *You* get cheap rent" (p. 128)). This is especially common amongst those who think the Buraku Issue is something of the past, already resolved and irrelevant, and who are not aware that Buraku discrimination remains, in fact, quite a large elephant in the room. Instead, the fault is placed with Burakumin themselves, who supposedly continue to keep this issue alive in order to draw state welfare (McLauchlan p. 53). There does exist a certain tendency amongst Burakumin to see social welfare as 'something we are entitled to', a "right that goes with [one's] minority status" (De Vos & Wagatsuma p. 269). According to De Vos and Wagatsuma, this expectancy has risen from what they call "deviousness" that is distinct in a minority's reaction towards any help from mainstream society. In expressing a certain 'take what you can get', Burakumin are maintaining their self-respect "since [they avoid] feelings of helplessness" (p. 269). McLauchlan attests to this, arguing that since it is rather difficult for Burakumin to find well-paid jobs, they are usually forced to seek out sub-contracting jobs,

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<sup>8</sup> See footnote seven.

where they are at great risk to be laid off first. After that, McLauchlan says, there are a disproportionate number of them who do not make the transition back to a paid job after receiving social welfare (p. 54).

Another apparent negative factor for some anti-Buraku discriminators, as appears from several of their acts, is arrogance, or being proud of one's outcaste heritage. Amos describes a rather recent case from around 2003, called the 'Mass Discriminatory Postcard Affair', during which a single assailant targeted over 400 people with postcards that contained death threats. Rather than having a problem with those who were supposedly of eta background, the culprit showed anger at those who openly claimed and showed pride at their outcaste heritage. As such, Amos thinks that it is this pride that people such as this perpetrator see as arrogance, for being proud of something that no one should be proud of and instead should (try to) hide and even should "accept [their] inferiority" (p. 195). What's more, showing pride in Buraku heritage is rejecting mainstream society, willingly taking on a self-identity that differs from 'normalcy'. In a society where nails that stick out generally get hammered down, such an open identification with what many consider to be a negative trait might even be perceived as threatening.

It might be said, then, that the discrimination against Burakumin has 'evolved' and incorporated contemporary anxieties, replacing old forms of prejudice with ones that are similar but adjusted to modern times. So, instead of being seen as 'dirty' and 'impure', Burakumin are now associated with more present-day worries such as that of (organized) criminal activity, 'lower-class problems', being unhygienic, unemployment, mooching off others and low intelligence. There is also the accusation of special treatment by the government, living off welfare, being too lazy to work, feeling unjustifiably entitled and in general being the parasites of society. This way, it continues to be possible to regard them as 'inferior' and perceive an unwillingness on the part of Burakumin themselves to change this.



Fig 1: "Die Etta" was sprayed on the entrance of the Buraku Liberation Research and Education Centre building (Kaiho Shimbun Osaka 1998).



This does not mean that old habits die easily, as ancestry remains the primary way to insult people from the Buraku, connecting them with the supposed impurity of these medieval outcastes (as can be seen

in Fig. 1 (Kaiho Shimbun Osaka 1998)). McLauchlan suspects, for example, that behind the envy of the improved facilities lies the same old prejudice that initiated the help in the first place. Although the BLL encourages and Burakumin themselves welcome those from around the Buraku neighbourhoods to make use of the facilities, very few do so – suggesting to McLauchan that this “bears witness to the continued existence of the notion that there is something unacceptable about buraku and their residents” (p. 36). Although McLauchlan mentions that it is “a rare thing today that buraku residents are threatened or humiliated by direct, confrontational discrimination”, he also indicates that more passive-aggressive acts such as anti-buraku graffiti are very much a daily occurrence and that many mainstream Japanese feel the pressure “to maintain their prejudice” in order not to fall out of grace themselves (p. 93).

### 3.2) *A Buraku self-perspective: pain and pride*

Anti-Buraku prejudice, with its many different faces, thus continues to inhibit its target group in such a manner that statistical differences between Buraku and mainstream Japanese in cases such as unemployment, high school dropouts, receiving social welfare and marriage are still disproportionate. As such, especially younger, disillusioned Burakumin have

a very negative outlook towards their future, which is, as McLauchlan describes, “more than just symptomatic of teenage *hankōku* (anti-everything), for they are cogs in the cycle of prejudice” (p. 93). Many therefore attempt to merge into mainstream society, and in the more well-to-do Buraku families there is often even strong pressure to do so (McLauchlan p. 111). Even the older people, especially those who were born before the sixties, found that despite the greatly improved living conditions and the easier access into formal institutions in non-Buraku areas, anxiety about people “finding out” who they are and experiencing anti-buraku prejudice, a lack of confidence and a rather negative outlook on improvement of the Buraku Issue are still often-experienced feelings (McLauchlan pp. 140-154). Although many said that they had mainstream friends, almost an equal number confessed to never having told those friends of their Buraku background in fear of being ostracized (p. 149).

Despite this, newly found pride in buraku ancestry is key to Buraku self-identity. According to Aoki Hideo (2009), the constants in this, what he names externally-shaped identity, are both pain and pride: both stem from discrimination and alienation from the majority group because the latter identifies them as Burakumin (p. 190). Pain is felt because being discriminated against brings misery and humiliation. Pride on the other hand, comes forth from being able to hold one's head high and commit to one's dignity and freedom despite discrimination. Basically, they have turned the aspects of their culture that mainstream Japanese culture holds in contempt into positive traits for themselves, very much as a cultural re-appropriation, which Aoki calls “symbolic reversal” (190).

Most of the interviewees McLauchlan spoke to attributed this positive self-identity to the endeavours of the BLL, who actively encourages Burakumin to be proud of their heritage instead of being demeaned by it. Up until Suiheisha began to initiate large-scale protests and openly demand more freedoms and more aid, Upham mentions, “Buraku leaders had tended to explain discrimination as the majority’s reaction to the low standard of living of Burakumin

and to stress self-improvement and adoption of upper-class mores as the road to equality” (p. 81). Suiheisha was the first to state that one should be proud of one’s Buraku heritage instead of being ashamed of it and attempting to ‘improve it’. Although Suiheisha fell apart due to inner strivings in 1942, the foundation of a new self-identity was laid down.

Interestingly enough, McLauchlan noted that a great number of self-references existed of “*Buraku no ningen*” (“humans in buraku”): as such, not their Buraku heritage was emphasised, but the fact that they were humans, who happened to live in a Buraku area (p. 99). This might imply a counter-strategy to relay to others that yes, they are from the Buraku, but they are first and foremost human. As opposed to self-deprecating comments or an acceptance of mainstream prejudice, this term, too, might be seen as sign of self-awareness.

Most terms to refer to Burakumin, though, imply geographical location instead of socio-cultural particulars. With the historical origins having become so muddled and with more possibilities to hide one’s Buraku origins, one’s (former) place of residency remains the most important factor to identify someone as being part of the Buraku. This is likely a consequence of the *koseki*-system which, even though it is now no longer public nor legal to investigate someone on this matter, has provided a great deal of companies and other interested parties with ammunition to investigate potential employees and in-laws. Tomonaga Kenzo, director of the Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute, mentioned in a 2008 “Newsletter of the Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center” that in a survey conducted amongst (non-Buraku) inhabitants of Osaka, most participants answered “If a person lives in a Buraku area,” “his/her relatives live in a Buraku area,” or “his/her family record is registered in a Buraku area” to the question as to how they would identify a person as being from the Buraku (p. 3).

What can subsequently be noticed amongst Burakumin themselves, is a tendency to identify themselves as being Burakumin based on locational reasons as well, or at the very

least amongst a large portion of young Buraku people. A 2004-2005 survey that was primarily directed at young Buraku people (up to 35 years of age), done by professor Uchida Ryushi (in service of the *Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute*), showed that 64.4% of the 202 respondents said they consider themselves Burakumin because they “live in a Buraku area”, 59.9% because they “were born in a Buraku area” and 48.0% because their “permanent registered address was in a Buraku area”. Only 27.2% gave the reason “because I think so”, e.g. they saw themselves as Burakumin simply because they thought they were. This indicates that upon forming their self-identity as Burakumin, many young people apply the same reasons as their discriminators use to do so, not because they see themselves as ‘born that way’. Although McLauchlan reported a refusal to accept residential address as the single denominator for Buraku identity, it is still the way in which many of them referred to themselves in conversations, using, aside from ‘Burakumin’, such terms as *Buraku jūmin* (“Buraku resident”), *Buraku shusshinsha* (“Buraku resident by birth”) and *Buraku no ningen* (“Humans in Buraku”) (p. 98). Another common self-determiner was *Hisabetsusha* (“Victim of discrimination”), which, while it does not imply any spatial characteristic, does base itself upon something designated by others instead of oneself.

This would therefore implicate that at least a large part of their identity is based on the perception of the ‘majority’ Japanese, which is why Aoki calls it a relational concept as it is subject to change, just like discrimination tends to evolve over time as well (p. 186). Edward Fowler (2000) quotes Hatanaka, a Japanese essayist: “It was not ‘In the beginning, there was Burakumin.’ If anything, ‘In the beginning, there was discrimination,’ and Burakumin were its product” (p. 16). Aspects of the prejudice that is held against them by the very people who ‘created’ this identity for them, then, seem to have influenced Buraku self-identity, at least amongst young people, which is therefore susceptible to fluctuation or abandonment. What the Burakumin themselves have done with this ‘Buraku discourse’, as a counter-reaction of

some sorts, is to turn it into a discourse of resistance. Both misery and pride thus also serve to see oneself as a Burakumin, distinct from and not belonging to the dominant group, but are awoken by discrimination by that group – discrimination which is, as will be discussed, built on quite questionable foundations.

## Chapter 4 – The Buraku Master Narrative

As discussed in chapter two, the outcastes of the Tokugawa period had a hard life where they had to deal with oppression stemming from both legal restrictions and mainstream commoners, but might not have had an altogether “universally low status” as there did exist several options from which they could gain profit and even considerable wealth (Amos p. 88). Yet, this is not an often-emphasized aspect in Buraku narratives. In fact, the notion of a solid continuity between pre-modern outcastes and the modern-day Burakumin is what colours most of these narratives, hereby turning both the medieval outcastes and the Burakumin into narrowly defined, single-minority groups that share a long bond of discrimination, otherness and ostracism. That this narrative is based on shaky foundations has shone through in the previous chapters, and this chapter will zoom in on the so-called Buraku master narrative to analyse as to what extent it plays a role in both mainstream and Buraku accounts, Buraku self-perspective and Buraku politics, and why it has remained so deeply ingrained in the language of those who were discriminated against in this exact same narrative.

### *4.1) A Master/Minority narrative*

A noticeable trend in any discourse on Burakumin is that they all tend to follow one line or at the very least, usually arrive at the same end. Jean-Francois Lyotard coined the term ‘Master Narrative’ to refer to this inclination, with which he meant an explanation and/or reassurance of a certain, illusionary world-view ushered towards progress, but which, in doing so, “smother[s] difference, opposition, and plurality” (Peter Barry 2009, p. 83). In the case of the Burakumin, then, their master narrative has formed them, over time, into a single, uniform community that has been the victim of continuous discrimination (based on a false ideology

of purity and pollution), with little regard for any differences within this group and its historical ambivalence.

In his book *Embodying Difference*, Amos makes use of the term master narrative as well. He argues that “Firstly, the master narrative ... is built on empirically and conceptually questionable foundations; and secondly, mainstream accounts tend to overlook the very important role Burakumin and other interested parties play in the construction and maintenance of the narrative” (p. 5). By making this last point, Amos is one of the first scholars to consider to what extent the role that Burakumin can have in their own narrative is decided by themselves. Amos does not question that Burakumin were and still are being discriminated against, but he attempts to show Buraku history from a different side by presenting three, as he calls them, “building blocks” of the Buraku Master Narrative:

- 1 - Those who we now call ‘Burakumin’ are a single, stable community with well-defined boundaries;
- 2 - the discrimination against Burakumin, based on a false ideology of purity and impurity, has existed for a long time and has been ever-continuous;
- 3 - buraku history “has remained relatively intact as a single entity from the pre-modern to the present” (p. 4).

In more or less similar phrasings, this Buraku master narrative is present everywhere, and both in Japanese and in Western academic work, newspapers, human rights institutions, etc. While it can never be said that there are no connections between pre-modern outcastes and those we call Burakumin, nor that the same kind of social marginalization was not experienced by these groups, it should be acknowledged that there are indeed historical discontinuities in the Buraku master narrative, that none of the groups involved exist of an unambiguous, distinctive collective of people and that the term ‘Burakumin’ is, in fact, quite a modern invention.

If a closer look is taken at the first building block Amos has proposed is part of the foundation of the Buraku master narrative, namely that the group 'Burakumin' is well-defined and exists of a single group of people, several counter points can be raised. Even if it is acknowledged that the term 'Burakumin' is a relatively new one, the use of which only arose during the Meiji Period, the term 'single group of people' would need to mean specifically those who share ancestral roots with pre-modern outcastes, particularly the eta, and are therefore subject to the same kind of prejudice: namely, that they are untouchable (or are descended of those who were initially branded as such and are therefore untouchable themselves). Yet, the instalment of the *koseki*-system caused many people without any Buraku origins to be stamped as having exactly that, simply due to the fact that they lived in outcaste neighbourhoods. The same happened in the 1960s, when the government built cheap apartment buildings for Burakumin, many poor people of the mainstream side of society came flocking to these neighbourhoods as well, taking the subsequent social stigma for granted in favour of much cheaper rent and good facilities (McLauchlan pp. 25-26). In fact, McLauchlan estimates that in the Buraku neighbourhood where he did his research the ratio of Buraku/non-Buraku residents was about fifty/fifty.

Lastly, while 'passing' as a non-Buraku and living in mainstream society is often considered 'dangerous' in that there is a large risk of being ostracized once one's Buraku status is revealed, it is often attempted nonetheless and probably has been done so since people began to treat other people as outcastes. While organizations such as the BLL include people of non-Buraku descent who live in Buraku areas, (an estimation of the number of) Buraku people who pass as mainstream, and Buraku people who refuse to consider themselves of former outcaste descent in their estimations, it remains to be seen in how far these people can be considered 'Burakumin' when relying on the Buraku Master Narrative. When half of those one claims to fight for do not wish to be identified as Burakumin, let alone



face attention by having an activist group actively encourage you to accept your fate, the question is in how far it is actually justified to continue to use them for one's own goals, no matter how positive these may be.

The second building block of the Buraku master narrative rests on the first, implying that, aside from making Burakumin and pre-modern outcaste community into the same group, discrimination against the eta and hinin was the same as the prejudice towards Burakumin. While it should be stated that these groups were indeed heavily discriminated, the image of a poor, wretched, marginalized and denigrated outcaste is not a universal one. As mentioned in chapter two, many regulations ensured that eta and hinin were seen as 'subhuman', yet other regulations gave them additional powers that commoners did not possess, such as being 'the strong arm of the law'. The fact that the segregation of occupations provided the outcastes with some sort of economic stability, with which some could even gain quite a fortune, is generally not something that can be found back in the Buraku master narrative. The point is basically this: the pre-modern outcastes and the modern Burakumin have in common that they are both discriminated against, on the basis that they are abnormal and therefore need to be ostracized. But this is something that most, if not all outcastes encounter, and one can hardly call, say, Burakumin and Afro-American people the same for both having experienced segregation from 'mainstream society'. It is therefore more a matter of status than one of 'sameness'.

#### *4.2) Being Buraku, Being human*

The idea of historic continuity, however, "frames the problem as one of a fixed group of historical outcast/es" (Amos p. 53). At least for a large portion of those who are nowadays identified as Burakumin, ancestral connections to pre-modern outcaste groups such the eta and hinin are more statements of belief than empirical facts – according to Amos only about

half of those who are seen as and view themselves as Burakumin claim actual eta heritage (p. 6). It was mentioned in chapter three how Buraku identity might be largely formed due to the treatment of the majority Japanese. Not only this discrimination in itself, but also the idea that discrimination against them has existed for “a long time”, even in pre-modern times, intrinsically connects them with pre-modern groups such as the eta and hinin, and subsequently makes Buraku history eta/hinin history – and also a way for Burakumin to stabilize their self-identity. Seeing that as Burakumin are different from many outcaste groups in that they are racially, ethnically and linguistically the same as those who discriminate against them, they need to have some sort of common identity in order to fulfil the very human need to belong somewhere. If ordinary self-identification markers such as race, ethnicity, language and religion cannot realize this goal, others are necessary.

This is where both pain and pride in Buraku self-identity come to play a role in this Buraku Master narrative. Pain, or the feeling of being unjustifiably discriminated against by people (who are inherently the same), serves as a common bond between Burakumin and as a tie that connects the modern Burakumin to the pre-modern Outcastes (specifically eta). Pride, then, serves to enhance this Buraku master narrative and, as a consequence of this long-standing history, to gain a positive self-identity out of the fact that one is able to keep their head up despite their difficult life. In this sense, Burakumin have made that which is held against them, namely being ‘different from normal’, into a positive outlook on life in that they, despite everything, are strong individuals and have been so for the past few hundreds of years.

In this light, it is also interesting to note McLauchlan’s discoveries relating to Buraku-terminology. As mentioned before, Burakumin tend to refer to themselves in terms that indicate, in some way or another, either *that* they are discriminated against (f.e. *Hisabetsusha* or ‘Victim of discrimination’) or the reason they are discriminated *for*, *Buraku no ningen* or

'Humans in Buraku' being a prime example. In this sense, the terminology used when referring to non-Buraku people can differ as well. *Ippan* or 'mainstream' was found to be the most often-used term when referring to non-Buraku people (p. 104). *Soto* or 'Outsider' was either in reference to mainstream Japanese or those of non-Buraku descent who lived in Buraku neighbourhoods, seemingly having a rather excluding ring to it (p. 105). *Burakumin ja nai* ('not a Buraku person') was often specifically used when referring to non-Buraku partners, or when acknowledging certain non-Buraku supporters of the Buraku cause (p. 104). This term, then, seems to have a "more inclusive and affirming connotation" according to McLauchlan.

What might be said then, is that on a 'We VS Them' scale there seems to be a clear indication that there exists a divide between 'We, Burakumin and Buraku-supporters' and 'Them, the mainstream Japanese and outsiders'. As such, Buraku identity based on having outcaste ancestry can be further established as a common bond. From this, it could be concluded that in their fight for complete acceptance of Burakumin by the 'mainstream' Japanese people, some Burakumin have generally adopted the same mind-set as their discriminators and in a way have further expanded the gap that exists between 'Buraku' and 'mainstream'. Although the BLL actively encourages Buraku and non-Buraku interactivity, they have adopted and stimulated the same ideas of Buraku identity. The possible answer as to why they utilize this ambiguous and to some extent faulty narrative will be discussed in the next section.

## Chapter 5 – The Buraku Liberation League: rhetoric, tactics, politics

The seeds of resistance that were planted by Suiheisha came to bloom after WW II in the form of the Buraku Liberation League. Founded by former Suiheisha members, the BLL (established as National Committee for Buraku Liberation in 1946, renamed in 1955) was infamous amongst the Japanese for their sometimes rather aggressive campaigns, which garnered a great deal of negative publicity but widespread exposure to the public nonetheless. Like Suiheisha had done as well, Upham indicates, the BLL forged ties with the Japanese Communist Party and the Japanese Socialist Party and partook in leftist riots such as a demonstration against the extension of the US-Japan Security Treaty.<sup>9</sup> By doing so, they were able to create a much wider “recognition of the existence and justice of their claims” (Upham p. 84).

The Japanese government, therefore, had little choice but to respond to these demands. The Law on Special Measures for Dōwa projects (the SML), which was passed in 1969 - only when, Neary asserts, these projects were sure not to intervene with the general economic recovery (p. 42) -, introduced special programmes which, broadly speaking, fell into three categories. The first aimed at the general, physical improvement of houses, streets, schools and hospitals in Buraku areas. The second was a system of grants for Buraku families, and the third, Neary says, was related to education; “general ‘enlightenment programmes which aim to change public attitudes” (p. 40). With the active efforts of the BLL, several more changes were introduced in the years between 1969 and 2002, such as the restriction on access to the koseki (family records) in 1976 and, when it was found out that several ‘black lists’

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<sup>9</sup> Ties with the Communists were soon severed, though – in the 1960s BLL members linked to the Communist Party formed their own activist organisation, *Zenkairon*, which disbanded in 2004. Source: Amos p. 264.

containing names of people living in Buraku areas circulated amongst major companies and universities, the prohibition of these lists (Neary 2002, p. 40).<sup>10</sup>

Yet, although the BLL continuously fought for it, discrimination was, and still has not been, legally prohibited by the Japanese government. In this sense, Neary argues, Japan is very different from the USA and the UK where in the 1960s the Civil Rights Act and the Race Relations Act respectively “sought to remove the obstacles to equality of opportunity by making discrimination illegal, empowering the individuals to protect themselves through the courts” (p. 42). In Japan there is no such law, and although companies are being limited in their actions to, for example, find out about a potential employee’s background, most of them hire private detectives to do the job, and there are no legal grounds to actually prohibit them from firing someone or refusing to hire someone on the sole basis of them being Burakumin. This limits the freedom to move and the options the BLL has, and therefore they have sought for and found a different way to continue campaigning and to keep the Buraku Issue from disappearing from public view: namely, to make it a human rights issue.

### *5.1) The Buraku master narrative at work in BLL rhetoric*

Susan J. Pharr, in her study on post-war protest activity in Japan, states that due to the influence of activist groups such as the BLL, “...burakumin youth had developed a strong consciousness of themselves as a minority with a right to demand that the educational system meet their needs” (1990, p. 86).<sup>11</sup> Pharr, like Amos, claims that the ideological change of democratization in post-war Japan, especially the notion during the 60s and 70s that in other countries minorities were demonstrating for their rights as well, greatly contributed to the

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<sup>10</sup> In 2002 the aid projects of the SML officially ended.

<sup>11</sup> Research has shown that once people (especially adolescents) come to accept their identity, not merely as a minority but as a specific group, they “tend to display higher self-esteem ... and ... minority adolescents who had achieved strong ethnic identities were better able [than] their less identified age-mates to maintain their happiness and sense of well-being in the face of daily hassles” (Shaffer, 2009, p. 193).

confident stance of Buraku activist groups. “Appeal for national belonging” became one of the main identifications for Burakumin with their own “history of suffering” (Amos p. 197). To reach this, the Buraku master narrative that dictates a history of continuity in which they form a coherent group with a long history and ties to pre-modern outcaste groups, may have proven to be beneficial. However, there is an inherent contradiction in BLL discourse:

1.) On the one hand, the BLL describes Burakumin as “not different from mainstream Japanese in any sense”. Discrimination is “a form of caste-like discrimination of a feudal nature, [which] has persisted into the modern age and discriminatory attitudes and structures against Buraku communities have not been eliminated in either the mind-sets of individual nor in different social systems of today” (from *Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute* homepage). In short, prejudice and discrimination against Buraku people are based on feudal, backward ideas – nothing that should exist in modern times. Burakumin themselves should see themselves as simply ordinary Japanese and avoid describing themselves in the terms that mainstream society has given them (McLauchlan p. 97).

2.) On the other hand, the BLL upholds, Buraku people should be proud of their identity (as a Burakumin) and should not forget who they are. This was already present in Suiheisha discourse, where they stated in their Declaration of March 03 1922 that “The time has come when we can be proud of being *Eta*”.<sup>12</sup> This kind of discourse could be viewed as manner to reinforce positive attitudes in an otherwise negative self-image that was especially prevalent amongst younger Buraku people. But then, what is this ‘Buraku identity’ the BLL is talking about? And what about the people of non-Buraku descent who moved into the neighbourhoods after these had significantly improved due to Special Measures funds? This is where the Buraku master narrative comes into play.

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<sup>12</sup> Suiheisha Declaration, from BLHRRRI website. Source: [http://blhrrri.org/blhrrri\\_e/blhrrri/ebooks001.htm](http://blhrrri.org/blhrrri_e/blhrrri/ebooks001.htm)

A sense of positive self-identity and communal responsibility is of course necessary in order to have a strong stance against any negative mind-set. It is also why the BLL is against people, especially the younger generation, leaving Buraku communities (McLauchlan p. 91). While leaving one's turbulent past behind and becoming relatively successful in life by having tertiary education and a job is generally a positive development, there is also the sense of leaving one's self-identity behind, in the form of one's community where one grew up in and belonged to. As such, the BLL has created what McLauchlan calls a "cocooned environment supported by the Special Measures funding", which means that, although the Buraku areas receive help, these areas themselves are also dependant on the structure of mutual kinship and security (p. 113). In this manner, the BLL welcomes and supports those who do not have outcaste heritage but want to profit from the benefits of living in a financially-supported neighbourhood: leaving, however, might undermine the community sense that the BLL strives to keep in order to make everyone aware of their shared background and the injustice that is entangled with it. The Buraku master narrative as an evened-out fabric, with irregularities and ambiguities ironed out, is therefore much more useful to the BLL in their war on discrimination, which is already a largely linguistic battle to begin with.

### *5.2) The BLL and their War of Words*

Aside from the Buraku master narrative, the BLL, in their ever-waging war against Buraku discrimination, has deployed several other methods in order to ensure that the Buraku Issue remains in the public eye. The tactic they are most infamous for is the so-called 'denunciation' or *kyūdan* campaigns. Already used by Suiheisha in the 1920s, the BLL utilized the considerably more liberal climate of the post-war period to further amplify this strategy. Upham defines it as follows: "...denunciation is the attempt by a group of League

members to convince one or more majority Japanese to adopt the BLL interpretation of a particular event, language, or policy that the BLL considers discriminatory” (p. 78). The difference with simple persuasion or expression of opinion is, Upham continues, that there is always an implicit threat of “limited physical force by large groups of Burakumin” present (p. 78). What this method does, then, is making the discriminator feel like the victim, not merely asking ‘Put yourself in my shoes’ but by means of an atmosphere that might be read as intimidating, largely re-creating the same feeling of oppression that discrimination causes.

When Suiheisha initially began using this tactic, it consisted mostly of a spontaneous action directed at individual perpetrators in order to obtain a public apology, which often ended in violent confrontations with large groups of commoners. Since actions like these had the consequence that negative feelings toward Burakumin only increased, Suiheisha adopted a change of strategy – rather than focusing on individuals, especially those of the lower class whom they considered to be victims of an oppressive patriarchy as well, Suiheisha concentrated on “institutional” discrimination, making perpetrators of this sort not only “enemies of Burakumin but ... enemies of all oppressed Japanese” (Upham p. 82). Participating in *kyūdan* campaigns unsurprisingly often led to arrest, but Suiheisha succeeded in making it a public issue nonetheless.

This tactic has been remarkably successful in that it not only attracts the attention of the public (however negative this may be), the government usually ends up firing, replacing or transferring the perpetrators as well since they do not want a great deal of attention. After WW II, the BLL resumed the usage of this tactic, albeit they had the same effect of inspiring fear of violence in mainstream Japanese and a subsequent self-censorship in the media. A famous case in which a foreigner was involved, the Dutch journalist and university professor Karel van Wolferen, illustrates this. Van Wolferen, who had done a great deal of research on political-corporate relationships in Japan, published a book in 1990 in which he criticized



some of the BLL methods. He was subsequently accused of discrimination by the BLL, who also demanded an immediate stop on printing the book. The Japanese publishing company, afraid of retribution in the form of a public humiliation, halted the process. Van Wolferen condemned it as an international scandal. Other controversial cases include those where the BLL held suspected discriminators prisoner and which involved browbeating and psychological bullying (Upham pp. 89-90).

To this day, although they claim to have completely sworn off all use of (implicated) violence, the BLL continues to justify kyūdan-campaigns, attesting that, in a society where discrimination is not illegal, this “legitimate self-defense” is necessary in order to protect Buraku rights “from criminal infringement by majority discrimination” (p. 107). Yet, the negative side of this is clinging to the BLL. The association of violence many mainstream Japanese have with Burakumin is still strongly present. Furthermore, with what the BLL has already reached in terms of improvement, a frequently-heard opinion is that the Buraku Issue has in fact already been solved but that the BLL, in using tactics like that of the kyūdan-campaigns, is only halting the ‘progress’ of Burakumin assimilating into mainstream society. With many people not aware that discrimination against Burakumin remains a very large problem (McLauchlan reports interviewing a non-Buraku working in a Buraku neighbourhood saying that “...such was the situation fifty years ago” when in fact answering a question about statistics from that year (pp. 83-84)), accusatory voices claim that the BLL is simply beating a dead horse in order to continue drawing financial aid from Japanese society.

As such, the BLL has recently shifted tactics, instead of using direct, confrontational methods focusing on liberal legalism and democracy in a way that provokes the Japanese government into participating: making the Buraku Issue a Human Rights Issue.

### 5.3) *A crown of thorns*

From the late 80s onwards, a new term began to be heard a great deal in discussions surrounding the Buraku Issue. In areas such as Osaka, where a relatively large number of Burakumin live and where the BLL and the Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center are located, 'human rights' has almost become interchangeable with 'buraku rights'. By clearly defining the Buraku Issue as a human rights problem, placing emphasis on similarities between the problems Burakumin have and the trouble of other minorities around the world and calling Buraku discrimination an "exceedingly pernicious violation of human rights", the BLL has succeeded in making the Buraku Issue an internationally relevant issue, and one that the Japanese government cannot push to the side so easily as they have done until now.

Coinciding with the period the BLL began to integrate a 'human rights'-discourse with their regular narrative, the Japanese government began to participate more actively in the UN bodies concerning human rights. Before that time, Neary (2002) says, Japan "was not an enthusiastic proponent of human rights within the UN", only reluctantly participating and not wishing to expose itself to criticism from abroad, which would give "indigenous human rights organisations the opportunity to ... exert pressure" (p. 35). Yet, Amos says, as Japan faced continuous criticism by the Human Right Council of the UN, they realized change was in order and began to change governmental policies in order to present "the right image to the international community" by, for example, signing several treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1979 (Amos pp. 169-170). Furthermore, during the World Conference in 1993, Neary takes account of Japan's position on human rights in that the Japanese delegation strongly explicated that it took "the universalist view in opposition to ... other South East Asian countries who insisted on placing human rights in the context of 'Asian Values'" (p. 50). All this gave the BLL a position of

power by linking the Buraku Issue to these treaties and to other, international minority issues.

The BLL is very aware that Japan desires to gain a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, having been advocating the Reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) since 2005, and in wanting so is also obligated to critically analyse the situation of their domestic human rights. They therefore cannot “obstruct the BLL’s use of a discourse of their own creation” (Amos p. 172). Since the ‘soft’ side of Buraku discrimination, the living conditions in the Buraku areas, has been steadily improving, the ‘hard’ side, anti-Buraku prejudice, remains problematic. The BLL has therefore been changing its priorities and moved towards the inclusion of other indigenous groups such as the Ainu and Zainichi Koreans in order to oppose what Neary calls “anti-democratic tendencies in Japanese society”, and reach out for minority groups all over the world for international cooperation and an intricate understanding of discrimination in general (p. 62).

In that respect, it is interesting as well that the BLL’s logo is a crown of thorns (see fig. 2 (BLL 1998)). Originally the Suiheisha-logo, which was heavily inspired by Christian doctrines, the BLL re-designed it and has been using the crown of thorns as their logo from the very beginning. Upham suggests that it may have to do with the fact that the BLL sees martyrdom as an important aspect of their duty, where the final goal is a world without discrimination and in which liberation has allowed everyone “to realize their own full



humanity”, including those who formerly discriminated (p. 104).

Yet, to choose a Christian symbol to represent their plight instead of a symbol of their own such as the taiko drums, which were traditionally produced by Buraku industries, might signify more

*Figure 2: The BLL logo  
(BLL 1998)*

than just martyrdom. Using such a well known, internationally recognized symbol for suffering seems to imply a desire for the same universal recognition for Buraku rights, emphasizing that first of all, Burakumin are human too.

Whilst some have argued that this shift in focus is because the Buraku problem itself has been largely solved, or that it is simply a way for the BLL to continue to force the Japanese government to take action, it might be argued for that making it a human rights issue is done to keep the Buraku issue very much alive and kicking – not so much in order to continue to be able to receive welfare, as some critics may claim, but in order to keep on searching for a solution for an issue that would otherwise just disappear into the background. As such, more so than with kyūdan campaigns or sheltering Buraku areas with financial aid, the BLL will be able to convey a wider, collective responsibility of human rights that addresses all of society and will perhaps finally come to a solution that will guarantee liberties and create an understanding between Burakumin and mainstream Japanese, without the need to ‘extinguish’ Buraku identity.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The Buraku Issue is definitely not dead, but very much alive. Anti-Buraku prejudice will likely not disappear overnight, and as such the search is still on-going for a solution that can help alleviate the situation for Burakumin and help mainstream Japanese develop a fuller understanding and empathy for these people, so that a consensus may be reached. What mainly needs to be dealt with but is simultaneously the hardest to take on, is that discrimination in Japan is not merely institutionalized, but very much a deep-seated, mostly unconscious part of people's mind-sets. Although recent changes, such as the recognition of the Ainu as an indigenous peoples in June 2008 and growing awareness of human rights amongst Japanese people, are hopeful indicators of a permanently changed outlook on race, human rights, discrimination, and Japanese society itself, there is still great deal that needs to be recognized, one of them being the Buraku Issue and the problem of the Buraku master narrative.<sup>13</sup>

In the past few decades, the Buraku Issue has not been a widely debated, but nonetheless controversial subject that has garnered attention, suspicion, admiration and contempt. As such, widely-varying opinions exist: many assume anti-Buraku discrimination is something of the past already, some claim it soon will be as long as the Buraku Liberation League stops with its scare-tactics, and other fear it has not ended and never will. What most, if not almost all of these discourses have in common is that they tend to follow one story line, that of the Buraku master narrative. While this narrative is built on shaky foundations, since most of the building blocks it exists of contain ambiguity, cannot be backed by empirical facts or are simply not as universally true as is generally believed, it is still deeply rooted in every discourse there exists on Burakumin, not only by those who use it to discriminate against

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<sup>13</sup> See Fogarty, Philippa (June 6, 2008). "Recognition at last for Japan's Ainu". BBC News (BBC).

Burakumin but also by Burakumin themselves. More narrowly speaking, the BLL, who holds a great deal of control in the national discourse on Burakumin, utilizes this discourse in their battle against discrimination.

The Buraku master narrative has become an integral part of a positive Buraku self-identity, something which needs to be maintained in order to stand up against discrimination. ‘Burakumin’, Amos asserts, “...is essentially a twentieth century Japanese term which has come to categorize a number of diverse *socially* distinct populations (as opposed to *biologically* distinct populations) into one common group” (p. 22). That labels such as Eta, Hinin, New Commoner and Burakumin are real labels implemented on real people who have been subsequently subjected to real discrimination is an undeniable fact. Rather than seeing them as all different groups of people who were judged by different contexts that were dominant in their respective times, such as the keeping of peace in the Tokugawa period and the attempt to fit to new, Western standards in Meiji times, the history of former outcastes and that of the Burakumin become connected, making them into one group and which therefore stabilizes ‘Buraku’ identity.

Those who are now called ‘Burakumin’ though, have been the first to employ the very narrative that was part of the discrimination against them, and turned it into a building block that helped establish a self-identity of both pain and pride. This self-identity comes back in all of the other solutions to the Buraku Issue that have been proposed and attempted in the past.

The ‘solution’ that is most often put into practice in Japan, the *Neta ko wo okosuna* or ‘putting-one’s-head-into-the-sand’ panacea, is generally believed to be the best since calling attention to the Buraku Issue would only perpetuate it and actually slow the process of Burakumin being integrated into society down. Furthermore, many people are afraid of retribution from the BLL’s side when attempting to participate in the discussion. Yet, even if it were the case that paying attention to the issue would elongate the whole problem,

‘forgetting about it’ and leaving it to time to heal all wounds would disregard all of the suffering Burakumin have experienced until now. Whilst some Buraku people would undeniably prefer this in order to live a peaceful, ordinary life in anonymity, still more refuse to have their identity – the one that was forced upon them, but the only one they have had until now and which they share with each other – taken from them. They wish for both the peaceful life and the life as being a Burakumin, without the prejudice attached.

Another strategy that has been implemented by the Japanese government is focusing on the effects of the anti-Buraku prejudice instead of the cause, that is, the fact that discrimination is still deeply rooted in Japanese society. While it cannot be said that there was no good-will involved on the part of the Japanese government, this has also allowed them to steer any discussion largely away from putting any anti-discrimination laws into action until now, and so no real mechanism exists that can ensure any of the rights Burakumin were promised, nor intervene in discriminative situations such as “recruitment practices of ... major companies” (Neary 2002, p. 42). Most Burakumin have realized this, and therefore see the financial aid as some kind of necessary evil – they need it in order to maintain a largely normal life, but they also feel a very strong distrust towards any form of public authority, McLauchlan informs, feeling that the government only provides them with aid due to the endeavours of activist groups such as the BLL (p. 50). This kind of suspicion is also perpetuating the ‘We VS Them’ mind-set that can be found in some Buraku communities, on the one hand serving as a communal tie and on the other as protection against those that discriminate. Although logical, this cleft needs to lessen in order to reach full understanding.

The BLL, in contrast, has indeed had great success in their battle against anti-Buraku discrimination. Their confrontational, public actions not only speak of an organisation disgruntled with the status quo, but also of a self-confident minority group who feel that it is the time for action. Their initially rather aggressive, almost militant tactics however, and their

stronghold on most of the Buraku discussion within Japan, have caused apprehension amongst the Japanese media, academics and individuals to participate in this discussion, fearing denunciation if they do so. Furthermore, whilst these tactics were effective in gaining major support from the government, Upham states that "...it has not enabled the Burakumin to universalize their complaints ... . Instead, the League is locked into an informal relationship with local governments that in the long run may be ... amenable to government control and manipulation..." (p. 24). As such, Upham claims, the BLL has reached a stalemate when it comes to utilizing the kyūdan strategy.

What none of these solutions to the Buraku Issue can seem to offer, then, is an attempt towards mutual understanding between Buraku and non-Buraku people. The Buraku master narrative continues to enforce the inherent difference between Burakumin and non-Burakumin. The Japanese government has mostly focused on the renovating of Buraku neighbourhoods, basically what may constitute to the outward 'face' of the problem. Whilst, like Neary states, educational programmes have been initiated, none of these are likely to have any concrete success as long as little is undertaken in order to put a stop to institutional discrimination. The BLL as well, has mainly focused on gaining retribution and apologies from those who discriminate, all the while enforcing the negative image that mainstream society has of them.

From the 90s onwards, then, a distinct change in their discourse can be discerned, which might contribute to a better, common understanding. By making the Buraku Issue a human rights issue, the BLL has not only been able to make the Buraku Issue more widely known but also pushed the Japanese government into taking more concrete action regarding discrimination. Although there is as of yet no law that illegalizes discrimination, at least this course of action enables the BLL to keep the Buraku Issue alive and under the public eye, without the need to give up Buraku identity.



Some Burakumin feel the need to leave their identity as a Burakumin behind and disappear in the relatively safe anonymity of mainstream society: a large number, especially younger people, is not even aware of their own heritage. Others continue to fight for their right to be a Burakumin but without the pre-attached discriminative notions tied to it. For this latter group especially, but for the former as well in that no one should have to hide part of who they 'are' in order to maintain a normal life, it is adamant that their history should not be forgotten or pushed away as a remnant of the past, since that would be the same as denying their existence.

This thesis cannot propose 'The' solution to a problem so complex as the Buraku Issue, but it is certain that attempting to ignore the elephant in the room is not viable either. It should not be forgotten or pushed aside and furthermore, prejudice will not disappear by itself. A first important step on the part of the Japanese government could be to put forward a law that illegalizes discrimination. A concession on the part of the BLL would be to be open to more voices in the discussion on the Buraku Issue, and in that sense not only come to a full understanding of what the mind-set of ordinary Japanese is, but to allow these people the chance for a fuller understanding as well.

*I realized that, I was a victim for not having been taught the Buraku history, and that the people, who were taught the wrong knowledge about Buraku and made discriminatory remarks were also victims. Appropriate awareness should be raised so that both do not become victims.<sup>14</sup>*

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14 Cited from Shiotani Sachikano's essay "The Buraku Liberation Movement and I", published on the BLHRRI website.

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