

# Not Even Human: The Birth of the Outcaste in Tokugawa Japan

James Miura

In Japan during the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568-1600), and the Edo period (1603-1868), social classes were enshrined into law by the Japanese government, with the effects of increased social stratification and decreased social mobility. Although this impacted all aspects of Japanese society, it most heavily impacted the people at the bottom of the social totem pole. This bottom consisted of Japanese groups sometimes referred to as *Eta-Hinin*, with *Eta* essentially meaning filthy, and *Hinin* literally meaning non-human. They were primarily comprised of people whose roles in society were considered unclean and impure. *Eta* were a hereditary caste, and referred to people who worked closely with corpses, such as executioners, tanners and butchers. The *Hinin* on the other hand, were comprised of “fallen people” such as beggars, vagabonds, street performers, low-class prostitutes, and the sufferers of diseases such as Hansen’s disease, commonly known as leprosy. Throughout the course of the Edo period, the status of *Eta-Hinin* declined as segregation became the law of the land, which led to *Eta-Hinin* groups acquiring the label of *Burakumin*, or hamlet people, in the Meiji-period.<sup>1</sup> The legacies of discrimination were felt long after the official dismantling of the segregated status of *Burakumin*, with *Buraku* rights groups continuing to fight for recognition and end discrimination in the modern era. The discrimination experienced by the *Burakumin* left its mark on Japanese society, a mark that Japan struggles with to this day. The plight of the *Burakumin* had its roots in the Edo Period with the legal code freezing the social classes into hereditary castes. This endowed discrimination against *Eta-Hinin* with legal weight and accelerated the progression of discrimination towards them.

The early historical analyses of *Burakumin* and *Eta-Hinin* assumed that discrimination originated from the adoption of Buddhism into Japan. This was based on the idea of inherent taboos in Buddhism against professions that worked with corpses for instance, which could explain the formation of outcast and outcaste groups. However, modern analysis has largely shifted away from this model. Part of this was the realization that although underclasses and outcast groups have existed throughout Japanese history, they have also changed over time. These classifications of people varied heavily, making major generalizations about historical continuity somewhat suspect. Although Japanese ideas of purity certainly seem to have had significant influence on the development of discrimination, the modern academic consensus is

against establishing a direct link between early Japanese ideas about impurity and the developments of the *Eta-Hinin* and *Burakumin*. To clarify, the status of *Eta-Hinin* have frequently been connected to Japanese ideas of purity, and quasi-religious taboos on the handling of dead bodies. However, these ideas of impurity and corruption manifested primarily as occupational or personal discrimination rather than hereditary discrimination. Therefore, scholars prefer to place the origins of the *Burakumin* in the *chūsei*, or Medieval Period of Japan.<sup>2</sup> With that said, there are four major categories to look at when considering the history of ethnic Japanese outcast and outcaste groups: the *Senmin*, literally low people, from the earliest recorded Japanese histories, the *Eta-Hinin* of the *chūsei*, the *Eta-Hinin* of the Edo period, and finally the *Burakumin* of modern Japan.

## The Roots of Stigma

Although categories of lesser people such as the *Senmin* existed in Japan from at least 645 C.E. onwards, the people constituting the low-status groups and their treatment changed heavily in the centuries afterwards. The *Senmin* of early Japan were originally legal slaves and were not permitted to marry outside the *Senmin*.<sup>3</sup> Children of *Senmin* were likewise slaves, and were not allowed to marry outside their social class. By the beginning of the 9th century, these laws and strict social controls had dissipated, allowing intermarriage between the *Senmin* and *Ryomin*, meaning good people. The abolishment of these restrictive laws led to the dissolution of the *Senmin* class. The later *Eta-Hinin* and *Burakumin*, though similar in that they occupied the lowest rungs of society, were not necessarily descended from the *Senmin* of earlier eras and should not be thought of as the same. This contrasts with early historical views of the *Burakumin*, which mistakenly saw a direct progression from ancient Japanese *Senmin*, to *Eta-Hinin*, to *Burakumin*.

Having established that despite similarities the *Eta-Hinin* were not the same as the *Senmin*, there remains a question of where the *Eta-Hinin* came from. The term *Eta* is first mentioned in the *Chiribukuro*, an encyclopedia from the mid-13th century.<sup>4</sup> The term *Eta* is derogatory, referring to an abundance of filth. Some of the earliest *Eta-Hinin* communities were likely *kawata*, or leatherworkers, and frequently lived in villages by riverbanks, being known as *kawarawata*, or river folk, a designation they shared with other groups such as butchers. There is evidence from the 15th century of negative attitudes towards these *Eta*, such as a Buddhist monk’s diary in 1446, wherein it referred to “those who carve up dead cattle and horses for consumption” as “the lowest kind of people.”<sup>5</sup> Although this demonstrated that there was already prejudice towards the *Eta*, it did

<sup>2</sup> Timothy D. Amos, *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011) 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Village Practice: Class, Status, Power, Law*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 246-247.

<sup>4</sup> George De Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, *Japan’s Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ooms, *Tokugawa Village Practice*, 247

<sup>1</sup> Chong-do Hah and Christopher C. Lapp, “Japanese Politics of Equality in Transition: The Case of the *Burakumin*,” *Asian Survey* 18 no. 5, (1978), 488

not take the form of explicit legal segregation during this period. However, the trend greatly increased prejudice towards the minority group, a trend that would increase rapidly during the sweeping social changes of the 17th century.

### Legal Discrimination in Edo Japan

It would not be unfair to say that the Edo Period was characterized by the lack of social mobility. This was in many ways intentional, as Toyotomi Hideyoshi's government, as well as the Tokugawa bakufu afterwards, created a number of laws based on neo-Confucian ideals with the intention of explicitly freezing the social classes. The new social order was the *shinōkōshō*, which divided Japanese society into four classes. These classes were samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants, with samurai at the top of the social hierarchy and merchants at the bottom.<sup>6</sup> However, the reality of Tokugawa society varied significantly from the neat and clear divisions of society suggested by the *shinōkōshō*. Nobles, priests, and the Eta-Hinin were excluded from the official classification, for instance. Regardless, the *shinōkōshō* did herald an age of decreased social mobility and greater divisions between classes. Status was supreme in Tokugawa society, and even within a class there were tremendous distinctions. For example, lower class samurai could not marry upper class samurai, and the same was true of merchants and samurai. A frequent exhortation by the Tokugawa government was *Mi no hodo wo shire* (Know your station in life)!<sup>7</sup> Also, for a peasant to move to another Daimyo's territories required permission, and marriage between classes was legally prohibited. Although some of these boundaries began to blur somewhat by the end of the Edo period, this did not benefit the outcaste Eta and Hinin.

Throughout the Tokugawa period, though the Eta-Hinin were looked down upon and treated poorly, they had the advantage of monopolies on the unclean Eta professions. Also, they were exempt from taxation due to the fact that taxation was in rice, and the Eta-Hinin were prohibited from farming. This allowed some Eta-Hinin to become wealthy, as in the case of Danzaemon, which was the hereditary title for the leader of Eta-Hinin groups in eastern Japan. Controlling a large portion of the leather in Japan afforded the Eta leaders significant wealth, and so Danzaemon were quite powerful. The Danzaemon of the mid-18th century apparently led over 6000 households, with a total yearly income of over 10,000 bushels of rice.<sup>8</sup> There were likely 13 different generations of Danzaemon, and for much of the Edo period Danzaemon lived in a mansion in Edo. Their influence over Eta-Hinin was such that in 1724, the Danzaemon was able to petition the Shogun to exile 224 Hinin to a remote island, and have the petition granted. Despite this wealth and power, the decline of Eta-Hinin status eventually led to the Danzaemon being

forcibly relocated along with their family and workers, to a segregated community named *Shinchō*<sup>9</sup> This treatment of one of the most prominent and powerful members of the Eta-Hinin community demonstrated that the environment of Japan was rapidly becoming more hostile towards members of the outcaste groups.

A large part of this decline in the status of the Eta-Hinin was that discrimination increasingly worked itself into the Tokugawa legal code. During the later decades of Tokugawa rule, laws were issued enforcing and strengthening the segregation of Eta-Hinin, including the establishment of specific clothing and hairstyle requirements. Also, their choice of profession was legally mandated. Not only were commoners prevented from performing impure Eta-Hinin tasks, but Eta groups were prevented by law from changing occupations.<sup>10</sup> For example, the son of an Eta tanner was a tanner, and so on. Over the Edo period, discrimination towards Eta strengthened, as the relative permissiveness of the Muromachi period faded into obscurity. Particularly in the latter half of the period of Tokugawa rule, as outcaste status declined, proscriptions against close interaction with Eta-Hinin became stronger. This is demonstrated by the kidnapping of the daughter of a Hinin man in 1781. The kidnapper was a peasant man who had lived with the Hinin woman for a year before selling her into sexual slavery to a tavern. The peasant man faced the threat of being legally considered a Hinin outcaste, not for the indignities perpetrated upon the Hinin woman, but instead due to his close relationship to an outcaste woman, which was considered taboo. The tale of the Hinin kidnapping demonstrates the incredible discrimination that Hinin experienced.<sup>11</sup> From this we can see that the Eta-Hinin were treated poorly both legally and socially, experiencing heavy discrimination.

The legal classification of Eta-Hinin served multifarious purposes in Tokugawa society. By existing as a rung of society beneath the primary four tiers, the samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants, the discrimination against Eta-Hinin rendered the wide gaps between the tiers into something relatively tolerable; the lowest commoner in Tokugawa society could consider themselves superior to Eta-Hinin. This suited the Tokugawa desire for a stable, long-lasting social structure. Despite this, it is important to remember that the Tokugawa classification of Eta-Hinin, which legally defined the position of Eta-Hinin, did not create the communities out of thin air. Kawata and other communities of Eta-Hinin were extant by the late *chūsei* period, and the declining status of Eta-Hinin in the Edo period reflected a pattern of discrimination that had become increasingly common by the end of the 16th Century.

### The Birth of the Buraku

During the Meiji period, social class changed drastically as the *shinōkōshō* was abolished and all classes became commoners. This abolition of classes

<sup>6</sup> Charles D. Sheldon, "Merchants and Society in Tokugawa Japan," *Modern Asian Studies* 17, no. 3 (1983), 477.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 478.

<sup>8</sup> De Vos and Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Amos, *Embodying Difference*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Hah and Lapp, "Japanese Politics of Equality," 488.

<sup>11</sup> Ooms, *Tokugawa Village Practice*, 257-261

did not fully apply to the Eta-Hinin originally, but the status of the outcastes was altered dramatically following the 1871 edict passed by the Meiji Government, the *mibun kaihōrei*, or Emancipation Edict. This edict meant that the Eta-Hinin were no longer a hereditary caste, and more importantly from the perspective of the cash-poor Meiji government, removed the tax-exempt status of the Eta-Hinin.<sup>12</sup> Despite the end of the explicit legal segregation, many of the 383,000 former Eta-Hinin became the discriminated minority known in modern Japan as Burakumin.<sup>13</sup> Not all Eta-Hinin became Burakumin. Some of the former Eta-Hinin undoubtedly took advantage of the newfound social mobility to assume new occupations and lives in Meiji Japan. However, the segregated neighborhoods of many Eta-Hinin groups were easily sorted by family occupation into the communities later referred to as Buraku, which were still the target of discrimination despite the Eta-Hinin being classified as *shinheimin*, or new commoners. The tensions of the Meiji period resulted in frequent riots, many of which targeted the *shinheimin*, resulting in brutal lynchings. This is typified by a riot in 1872 in Nara, wherein a group of *shinheimin* were lynched by townsfolk.<sup>14</sup> Also, groups like leather workers who had benefited from the segregated and tax-free nature of Eta work now faced competition and taxation. Without the monopoly on Eta professions, many communities of *shinheimin* languished under increasing poverty. The drastic poverty that many of these groups faced had the unfortunate effect of transforming their communities into ghettos and slums.<sup>15</sup> The poor living standards of the former Eta-Hinin served to justify continued discrimination in the minds of the Japanese population. Increasingly, Japanese figures decried the lack of morals and civility inherent in the people of the slums. Thus, the abolishment of the ignoble classes simply perpetuated the plummet of the Eta-Hinin.

The impoverished communities of these former Eta-Hinin began to be referred to by Meiji officials as *tokushu buraku*, or special districts/hamlets. This is what led to the term Burakumin, people of the hamlets.<sup>16</sup> The association of Burakumin status with geographical area meant that the Japanese family registry could be used to determine Buraku status, as ancestral homeland was listed on the registry. The availability of this information led to a situation where disadvantaged people pushed into these marginalized areas eventually fell under the classification of Burakumin. This is a large part of the reason why it cannot be said that the Burakumin are simply an evolution of the Edo period Eta-Hinin, as some of the Burakumin were disenfranchised peoples with no historical connection to the outcastes of the Edo period.

The Burakumin during the early 20th century suffered from poor educational attainment, grinding

poverty, a lack of opportunity for social and economic advancement, and tremendous discrimination. This was compounded by an increasing tendency to label disenfranchised and disliked communities as Burakumin. The popular discrimination faced by the Burakumin is demonstrated by a handbook published by the Meiji Ministry of Justice in 1880, which described Burakumin as "Eta and Hinin, the lowliest of all the people, almost resembling animals."<sup>17</sup> A 1906 statement by Arimatsu Hideyoshi, the governor of Mie prefecture, stated that while it was unfortunate that fellow citizens would be discriminated against, it was "unavoidable that the community be treated with suspicion because statistically this 'buraku' had many criminals."<sup>18</sup> This ill-treatment, despite the ostensible equality provided by the *Senmin Hashirei*, led to calls for resistance and liberation. These resulted primarily in two different paths towards liberty; *Dōwa*, which meant Assimilation, and *Suihei*, which meant to level or equalize society. *Dōwa* was frequently promoted by government policy, which felt that the problem of Buraku would disappear if the Buraku were assimilated into the greater mass of Japanese citizenry. The assimilationist model sought to eliminate the Burakumin history in the interest of a stable society. The *Suihei* model, on the other hand, proposed that societal equality should not be achieved by erasing the cultural experiences of Burakumin, but by eliminating the discrimination from society.<sup>19</sup> Fundamentally, the two paths diverged on the question of who had the responsibility for ending Buraku discrimination. *Dōwa* adherents put the burden on Burakumin to change, and *Suihei* advocates put the burden on those who discriminated.

The fight for Buraku rights would not be quickly won. From the start of the Buraku liberation movement in the early 1920s, it would take almost 50 years to win major concessions from the government. During this time, one of the most important figures in the *Suiheisha* movement was Matsumoto Ji'ichiro, a figure at times referred to as the god of Burakumin. Matsumoto, who lived from 1887 to 1966, was from the Buraku of Kanehira in Kyushu.<sup>20</sup> Matsumoto joined the *Suiheisha*, or leveler's association, movement in 1923, although Matsumoto had been prominent in other activist movements years prior. In 1925, he became the Chairman of the *Zenkoku Suiheisha*, the National Leveler's Association. Matsumoto continued leading the cause of Buraku liberation until his death, both as part of the *Zenkoku Suiheisha*, and later as leader of the influential Buraku Liberation League. Under his leadership, after countless government crackdowns on Buraku activist groups, an activist-led petition convinced the Japanese diet to appoint a Deliberative Council for Buraku Assimilation to research Buraku living conditions.<sup>21</sup> In 1965, the council

<sup>12</sup> De Vos and Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>15</sup> Amos, *Embodying Difference*, 121-123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>17</sup> De Vos and Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race*, 37-38.

<sup>18</sup> Amos, *Embodying Difference*, 134.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>21</sup> De Vos and Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race*, 84.

released its' report, and in 1969 the Special Measures Law was passed to allot 15 trillion yen to *Dōwa Mondai*, or assimilation issues.<sup>22</sup> Matsumoto's tireless activism on behalf of his people provided a tremendous example for the Burakumin throughout Japan, an example that lives on to this day.

Although the brutal and overt discrimination of the past has largely subsided in the modern era, largely due to the efforts of activist groups such as the Zenkoku Suiheisha and the Buraku Liberation League, Burakumin still face a number of problems. Japan has had near-universal education for years, however many older Buraku in particular were excluded or ignored by the educational system, resulting in low rates of literacy, poor educational achievement, and frequent poverty. These problems continue into the present, as Burakumin struggle against a hostile society eager to blame Buraku leaders for perpetuating a narrative of discrimination in a modern era believed, by many Japanese to be a myth. Much of the Japanese population believes that assimilation and integration has been successful, that Buraku are now a mere historical anomaly. Therefore, the only remaining problems are the activists unwilling to allow the issue to die. This is aptly demonstrated by Burakumin historian Uramoto Yoshifumi, who reports being denied his identity as a Burakumin by friends, and being told the Buraku problem was a thing of the past. This denial led Uramoto to reply that "If buraku are a problem of the past, then why do you discriminate against them? If they are a thing of the past, then who am I that is hurt by your remarks? Am I a ghost?"<sup>23</sup> Uramoto, who has faced death threats for his insistence on the need for Buraku rights in modern Japan, is not alone in his experiences. In 2001, Taro Aso, who became Prime Minister of Japan in 2008-2009, reportedly responded to the idea of a Burakumin becoming Prime Minister by asking rhetorically "Are we really going to let those people take over the leadership of Japan?"<sup>24</sup> These reactions serve to illustrate that the discrimination faced by Burakumin is still ongoing.

In conclusion, marginalized and disenfranchised groups of ethnic Japanese have been present throughout Japanese history. There is no discernible linear connection from the discriminated groups of the earliest periods of recorded Japanese history to the modern Burakumin; the nature of the suffering and the individuals targeted for marginalization have varied significantly. Regardless, we can see the progression of discrimination towards the Eta-Hinin of the Edo period, and how the incorporation of discrimination and segregation into the legal code of Japan massively exacerbated the problems. Also, the experiences of the Burakumin serve to illustrate the difficulties involved in overcoming deeply entrenched discrimination within a society. Maeda Katsumasa, a

Burakumin activist, made a stirring call-to-arms about ending the discrimination against Burakumin in Japan in one of his poems:

There is not a single person,  
Who leaves their mother's womb,  
Planning to be discriminated against.  
I pity those who discriminate.  
Problems shouldn't arise just by being born.  
Give to children the fragrance of the earth,  
Light from the sun,  
The love of humanity.<sup>25</sup>

In order to answer this call, and end the discrimination against Burakumin, the first step must be to admit that the Burakumin are not a group confined to the past, and that anti-Burakumin discrimination is not just a historical curiosity: It continues in present-day Japan.

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<sup>22</sup> Amos, *Embodying Difference*, 160-161.

<sup>23</sup> Amos, *Embodying Difference*, 18

<sup>24</sup> Makiko Inoue, "Japan's Outcasts Still Wait For Acceptance," *New York Times*, January 15, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/16/world/asia/16outcasts.html>

<sup>25</sup> A Poem by Burakumin poet Maeda Katsumasa found in Timothy D. Amos, *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 8