Chapter 7[1]
Civic engagement and community development among Japan's Burakumin

Yuko Nishimura

7.1 Introduction: Visible and invisible

In Japan, government policies generally don't recognize the country's ethnic or minority diversity, preferring to view Japan as homogenous. In the words of Prime Minister Taro Aso, Japan is "one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture, and one race".[2] However, Japan is, in fact, a multiethnic country where there are ancient ethnic minorities such as Ainus and Okinawans. There are also resident Koreans and Chinese, many of whom were forcibly relocated to Japan during Japan's colonial era, and, there are recent immigrants of Japanese heritage whose grand and great-grand parents emigrated to Latin and South America in the early 20th century. Although they are not racially different from the rest of Japanese, Japan's ex-Untouchables, the *Burakumin* are another 'ethnic' minority.[3] Living on the fringe of society in segregated neighborhoods and hamlets called "*Buraku*", they were treated, beginning with the Tokugawa era, as 'non-human' and 'pollutants.' Today, Burakumin status is comparable to other Asian minorities such as Korea's Pak-chee and India's Scheduled Castes (ex-Untouchables).

Visitors to Japan, including serious students of Japan, are usually unaware of 'Japan's Invisible Race'.[4] The Japanese people themselves are only dimly aware of the Buraku and are fearful of touching upon this issue. Yet the Buraku have been trying hard to uplift their status and challenge the social injustices of many centuries. In the early 20th century, Buraku leaders created the Levelers' Association (*suihei-sha*) to combat discrimination and achieve equality. Significantly, the Levelers' Declaration of Establishment is prominently quoted in Japanese school textbooks as an example of a Japanese civic movement in search of social justice, equality, and autonomy.

The Buraku Liberation League (BLL), which succeeded the Levelers' Association after World War II, achieved a great political triumph by negotiating with the government for passage of the Special Measurement Law which supported their efforts to build community infrastructure, educate their children, get jobs in local governments, and educate children of non-Buraku origin about Buraku discrimination. After 33 years of law-enforcement and the spending of 15 trillion yen for public projects in Buraku neighborhoods, the law was allowed to expire in 1992 with the assumption that the Law's goals had been reached.

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[1] ©Yuko Nishimura 2010 in *Civic Engagement in Contemporary Japan*, Springer.
[2] Aso, made Prime Minister in September, 2008, made the statement in 2005 when he was Foreign Minister (*The Japan Times,* Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2005).
[3] Ethnicity is a loose term which represents social groups with a shared history, sense of identity, geography and cultural roots. And according to Geertz (1973), culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life'(p.89). In this chapter, ethnicity is understood as a much smaller category of culture in which people share strong emotional experiences and historically transmitted pattern of meanings expressed in daily lives.
[4] DeVos and Wagatsuma (1973)

However, as this chapter will show, discrimination continues.[5] In addition, the contradiction of an "invisible" Burakumin community faced with on-going and entrenched discrimination is an artifact created in large part by reaction to the public denunciation tactics of Buraku civic organizations, particularly the BLL. These tactics, often employed against those supporting their cause, but not hewing exactly to the BLL political line, have made the media, academia and educators fearful of even discussing the existence of Burakumin, thus limiting discussion of Buraku issues mainly to the people of Buraku origin themselves.[6] Paradoxically, the denunciation tactics seemed neither to end discrimination nor to create a positive identity within the community.

There is, however, another side to the story. It is the story of successful community building activities (in Japanese, *machizukuri*) by many Buraku leaders, some of whom will be highlighted in this chapter. Their stories need to be told because like so many other positive stories from the Buraku, they have not been shared with those outside of the Buraku. For example, the model for today's popular *machizukuri* 'movement' is widely attributed to the community building activities of a working-class neighborhood in Kobe (Watanabe 2007). In fact, the efforts of that neighborhood were preceded by unacknowledged, but larger and more holistic efforts in several Buraku neighborhoods throughout Japan.

The scary Burakumin

In 1987, an ambitious but controversial book titled *Dowa wa kowai-kou* (Why the Dowa are scary) was published.[7] Collaborating with Buraku-born activist Muichi Maekawa, Keiichi Fujita tried to answer this question. The fear, they said, is partly created from the ignorance of outsiders and, in part, from some Burakumin who take advantage of the fear to extort money. They describe how the negative images of Burakumin created from both inside and outside the Buraku hinder efforts by Burakumin to create a positive identity about themselves. Questioning the attitude of some Burakumin who claim that every disadvantage in the Buraku is caused by outsiders, Fujita and Maekawa argue that whether a particular action by an outsider is discriminatory or not should be judged by outsiders as well as by Burakumin. The refusal to accept criticism from outside puts the community in the position of being a permanent victim, which is harmful to the advancement of the Buraku community as a whole. Both Maekawa and Fujita also criticize the indifference of some Burakumin towards other minorities, particularly to those who are poorer and more destitute than them, quoting the statement of one Buraku woman who said that the Kamagasaki day labourers were jobless because they had no will to work while Burakumin had a will to work, but could not find work because of discrimination (Fujita 1987: 65).[8]

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[5] It is still difficult for Burakumin to intermarry. According to BLHRRI data, in 1993 Kyoto, 33.3 percent who married someone from non-Buraku faced opposition from their parents or relatives (70 % of such opposition came from non-Buraku parents) . However, another data shows the increase of intermarriages particularly in the age group below 40 and less, and among the couples who are below 30, more than 67 per cent are intermarriages. That shows that people marry in spite of oppositions from family members(see http://blhrri.org/nyumon/jittai/nyumon_jittai_kekkon_1.htm).

[6] Thus, the many academic papers and books that have been written on the history of Buraku, the discrimination against them and their political liberation movements are largely ignored, or at least not discussed, by other academics or the media.

[7] Dowa is a shortened form for districts which is benefited from assimilation policy (dowa seisaku), and is often used as a synonym of Buraku.

[8] Kamagasaki (in Osaka) is one of the most famous flop-house districts in Japan.

Fujita believed the passage of the "Special Measures Law" by the Diet in 1969 had a largely deleterious effect on the Buraku community by 'hardening their hearts' against others. Perhaps this is true, but the Law also provided the BLL with a notable triumph by forcing the central and local governments to work on improving the living conditions of the Buraku people who remained in segregated and destitute neighborhoods. As a result, community infrastructures were improved, many Burakumin were given stable jobs, and children could go to school.

On the negative side, by the time the SML expired in 1992 Buraku civic organizations had become dependent on the SML subsidies. Moreover, the organizations were opaque in their management and in the late 1990s charges of corruption involving the Buraku Liberation League and local governments began to surface. For the most part, the allegedly corrupt neighborhood leaders have been replaced by new leaders who promise to operate the organizations in a more transparent manner. Until the expiration of the SML, the media seldom reported on such corruption or on the political battles inside the community.

7.2 Who are the Burakumin?

Burakumin literally means "hamlet people" in Japanese and refers to those who lived in hamlets separated from the villages and townships of the 'common people'. The history textbooks maintain that, as far back as the 16th-17th centuries Japan's population was divided into four broad categories: samurais (warriors), farmers, craftsmen and merchants. However, there were also people living on margins of society considered untouchables, i.e. *eta* (pollutants) and *hinin* (nonhumans). Segregated in *Buraku* hamlets, they were considered to be below, or even 'outside' of the four recognized categories. While the current number of Burakumin is hard to determine, one researcher claims there are now at least 6,000 Buraku districts throughout Japan and the number of Burakumin is close to 3 million.[9]

Although the history is cloudy, most school text books maintain that *eta* and *hinin* were poor landless peasants and wanderers who had been forced by financial necessity to work in the areas which were polluting or dangerous: street scavenging; removal of animal carcasses, human corpses and excreta; maintaining cremation grounds; skinning animals; leather tanning and crafts; meat curing; and so on. As government servants, they were charged with the apprehension of criminals and with executions. Some worked as street entertainers, laborers, hunters, fishermen, peddlers and gamblers, night watchmen, boatmen and in convoys of long distances. Other Buraku were connected to the traditional entertainment and arts fields such as Noh, Kabuki, and Bun-raku (puppet shows). Some were even involved in the creation of the artistic rock gardens in Kyoto temples.[10] Yet their status was considered to be low, and Burakumin were forbidden to marry outside of the Buraku community and as a marginalized people they were despised and disdained. The status of Burakumin remained unchanged until the end of the Tokugawa era.

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[9] According to 1993 census, the population is said to be around 3 million (BLHRRT 1997) yet this does not include those who live outside the hamlets.

[10] Although these performers and craftsmen were originally from Buraku communities, they were able to leave the Buraku hamlets in the 17th and 18th centuries and "merge" into the lower strata of "commoners." (Harada 1975: 65-67).

In 1871, the new Meiji Government promulgated the Emancipation Edict. The Edict 'outlawed' the Burakumin status of untouchablity and announced that Burakumin would henceforth be known as *shin heimin* or 'new commoners'. However the Edict did not include any concrete measures to eliminate discrimination and in some ways, their status was made worse off than before. As '*new*'commoners they were still labeled, even as they lost their monopoly on profitable leather and tanning crafts as well as on lower categories of police jobs. Moreover, learning of the Burakumin's elevation to 'new-commoners' status, 'traditional' commoners and peasants felt threatened and sometimes attacked Buraku hamlets (Harada,1975: 194-195).

In 1872, just a year after 'emancipation', the government initiated a family registration system and a census of the Japanese people. In order to distinguish between nobility (*kazoku*), samurai (*shizoku*), and commoners (*heimin*) this *jinshin koseki* included a column to record the status of the family. Burakumin were not recorded simply as *heimin* (commoners) but as *shin heimin* or 'new commoners'. This label became a synonym for Burakumin and a stigma from which they could not escape. The emancipation also aroused hostility among the peasantry who feared that their status could be reduced to the same low status as *eta*. Out of hostility, numerous anti-*eta* liberation riots occurred between 1868 and 1878 (Hane, 1982: 144) and the authorities in Oita prefecture burned down a Buraku hamlet claiming it was a nest of criminals and drifters (Hane 1982: 146). Thus, even in the 'modern' Meiji era, Burakumin were not allowed to participate as equals in village affairs or in the village festivals of the 'commoners'.

7.3 Meiji era 'hamlet people' and discrimination

Although some liberals and philanthropists worked to see Burakumin treated as 'true' commoners, government policies remained semi-feudalistic, confused and oppressive. For instance, some authorities made plans to send Burakumin as emigrants to foreign countries – particularly to China (Asano, 2007), while others supported efforts to provide (token) budgets for education. Still other bureaucratic measures involving the *yuwa* (reconciliation) movement insisted that discrimination was actually the fault of the Buraku themselves and, therefore, they should correct their manners and behaviors to become good commoners (Asaji, 2008:82).

Faced with discrimination, heavy taxation, illiteracy and a lack of capital, many rural Buraku people moved to segregated urban Buraku neighborhoods where they worked the toughest jobs as coal miners, port workers, and unskilled day-laborers or became peddlers and gamblers. Offered few other choices, some became *yakuza* (Japanese gangsters). Treated like 'animals', deprived of education, left without a decent physical environment and denied respect as human beings, Burakumin became modern Japan's underclass.[11]

7.4 Social protest movements for human rights

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[11] As a derogatory usage, Buraku people are often called 'yotsu' (four-legged animals).

Japan's outcastes and underprivileged have a long history of protest. Between the 15th and 16th centuries, monks from *ikko-shu*, a famous Buddhist religious sect, aggressively recruited the underprivileged and frequently challenged the authorities. Researchers of *ikko-shu* also maintain that there were a considerable number of Burakumin in this rebellious sect. Although it did lose power eventually, *ikko-shu* actually took political control away from some *samurai* dominated regional governments. Recent research has also uncovered centuries of protest in the form of *ikki* or "peasant riots" when peasants were faced with famine or unjust taxes.[12]

The modern era also saw periods of social unrest, especially following the popular Russo-Japan War (1904–05) in which Japan was victorious. The post-war period brought unemployment, low-wages, commodity shortages, inflation and riots, the most famous of which were the "Rice Riots" (*kome sodo*) of 1918. The riots started in a fishing hamlet in Toyama prefecture as a small protest organized by fishermen's wives who attempted to stop the export of grain in the face of inflated prices. But the unrest spread quickly throughout the nation, involving thousands of peasants and commoners, and a considerable number of Burakumin.

The government tried to pacify Burakumin discontent by co-opting the Yuwa conciliation project (established in 1903) by providing significant financial help to the organization and through which the government gave small amounts of funds for improved education and housing (Siddle 1996: 120). When other Burakumin leaders made plans to start a new and independent organization, the government promised to include them in the government if they would drop the idea. However, in 1922, influenced by leftist thought and Christian principles, young Burakumin intellectuals based in Kyoto formed *suiheisha* ("The Levelers' Association"). The militant Suiheisha forged links with other radical organizations to campaign against discrimination. Their ideology was left-wing and their tactics aggressive. Neary (1997) maintains that two strategies made Suiheisha unique. First, the leaders were determined to emancipate themselves through their own efforts and self respect without depending on outside help from non-Burakumin. Secondly, they rejected the idea that the Burakumin "problem" existed within Burakumin themselves and that it was social attitudes by the majority that needed to be changed.

In 1942, following the outlawing of socialist and communist parties, the wartime government forced Suiheisha to dissolve. However, one of the founding members, Matshumoto Jiichiro, remained in the Diet and, in 1946, after Japan's defeat in World War II, Matshumoto and his followers quickly resurrected the association, renaming it the National Committee for Buraku Liberation (NCBL). In 1950 it became simply the Buraku Liberation League (BLL).

7.5 The BLL and denunciation tactics

The denunciation tactics developed by pre-war Suiheisha were unique and powerful. Suiheisha monitored discrimination against Burakumin and as soon as its members heard of an incident, they would confront the 'guilty' party and demand a public

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[12] Ikko-ikki led by Ikko Shu is famous for its strong resistance against the Toyotomi government. Ikkoshu is also known to have been aggressively propagating among *etas* and *hinins.* And according to Teraki (1996) and Ishige (1983), many rebellious *ikki* peasants were reduced to *eta* status by the government as a way to teach them a lesson and give warning to others.

apology. The tactic was employed on a larger (and sometimes more aggressive) scale by the post-war BLL, but the original intention was to end discrimination though public education.

Even though the denunciation tactics were a legitimate expression of anger against social injustice, the results were often a violent reaction by police or the public against Burakumin and their Suiheisha leaders. In counter-response, Buraku youth, sometimes yakuza members who were sympathizers of Suiheisha, took it upon themselves to fight back. Thus, Suiheisha became perceived by the public as an aggressive and violent organization.[13] Regardless, the militant campaign against social prejudice did shake the government and cause it to reconsider the inadequacies of its policies towards Burakumin.

In 1951, a story titled 'Tokushu Buraku' (special hamlet), and describing the ghetto-like hamlets of the Buraku as inhuman, crime ridden and yakuza controlled appeared in a pulp fiction magazine called *All Romance*. Written by a Kyoto city employee, the story accurately described Buraku neighborhoods as being without tap water, sewers or even electricity, but full of crime and gangsters.[14] Although the short story intensified the negative image of Buraku neighborhoods, the BLL quickly turned the "incident" to their advantage, challenging Kyoto city government authorities and demanding that they rectify the lack of infrastructure in Buraku neighborhoods (Harada 1975:365). In a public denunciation meeting, Kyoto authorities had to admit that Buraku neighborhoods lacked even the minimum standards of living for human beings and the authorities had little choice but to create a budget for the improvement of Buraku areas. That was the first incident to make the local government take serious steps to improve the *Buraku* neighborhood.

7.6 The Special Measures Law

Years later, at the national level, with strong political backing of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), a special commission on Buraku was created within the Prime Ministers' Office. The commission released the Dowa (Assimilation) Policies in 1965; In1969 the Diet passed the "Law on Special Measures for Dowa Projects" (SML).

The SML, a ten-year plan extended several times, shaped Burakumin life for more than three decades. SML projects improved the physical environment of Buraku neighborhoods and included social welfare programs providing financial aid, educational scholarships, and subsidized public housing. There were also attempts to change attitudes through public school anti-discrimination programs in Osaka, Kyoto and Nara, areas where large populations of Burakumin resided. Finally implementation of the SML through local governments gave the BLL a strong financial foundation for their projects for decades.

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[13] According to Miyazaki (2006, 2008), there were a considerable number of Yakuzas who participated in the 1918 Kobe rice riots (2008:179). Miyazaki, himself born into a family of Burakumin and Yakuza, persuasively argues that traditional yakuza organizations served as a refuge and protector of Burakumin. Inoue and Watanabe (1960) also discuss the ambivalent political roles of pre-war yakuzas. Some were sympathizers of the left other of the right. During the rice riots, some led the riots and were arrested while others, particularly after the rice riots, served the interests of the ruling class and the government.

[14] The *Buraku* described in this novel was in fact a Korean Buraku yet this fact was hardly touched by BLL members when they were negotiating with the local government.

The Yata incident and the court ruling

The BLL also changed its militant political strategy and started working with mainstream policy makers and the government. Following its establishment in the late 1940s, the BLL had maintained a strong alliance with the Japan Communist Party (JCP), as well as the JSP (Japan Socialist Party). However, the alliance with the JCP became strained when the BLL began to develop an alliance with the mainstream LDP. The JCP, objected to the LDP alliance but more importantly, disagreed with the policy of limiting SML privileges to Burakumin and the government subsidies only for the BLL. The JCP had as its goal the "liberation" of all workers and its focus was on universal emancipation. The JCP regarded Burakumin issues as culture specific, an artifact of feudalism that would be removed once universal emancipation took place. This attitude created a strain between JCP and BLL and as the relationship became strained, the JCP created its own Buraku support organization called *zenkairen*. Through the 1970s and 1980s, conflict between the JCP and the BLL escalated culminating in the "Yata incident."

      In 1969 in Yata, a Buraku district in Osaka, middle-school teachers supporting the election of JCP candidates distributed an anti-BLL pamphlet. A subsequent BLL "denunciation action" turned violent, with the teachers being held for over 10 hours by BLL members and badly beaten. The BLL attackers were charged with a crime but were acquitted in court. The court ruling not only found the defendants innocent, but expressed strong sympathy for their denunciation tactics (Rohlen 1976).

      There were other such incidents and sympathetic rulings by courts which encouraged the BLL to continue its use of denunciation tactics, often targeting organizations and corporations as well as individuals. Denunciation targets included corporations that bought underground lists of Buraku neighborhoods (*chimei sokan*) in order to identify, and thus not hire, Buraku youth.[15]

7.7 The decline of the BLL

Though controversial, the denunciation tactics often won significant victories for the BLL. For instance, the campaign against Buraku name lists targeted the Ministry of Justice, forcing the ministry to make the *koseki* (birth registration) record of birth place confidential information. However, the BLL did not capitalize on this victory by seeking equality for other minorities, nor did it seek alliance with other minority organizations such as those representing resident Koreans or non-Japanese migrant workers, or even with the women's groups.[16] Significantly, the BLL did not extend the

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[15] The debate about whether former Buraku neighborhoods should be publically acknowledged continues. Recently (2009) Google Earth added Japanese historical 'overlay' maps to its on-line collection. One of the feudal-era overlays included Tokyo and Osaka neighborhoods designated as "eta." Learning of the on-line map, an Osaka leader of the BLL filed a complaint with the Justice Ministry and demanded an 'accountability session with Google. However, a Tokyo based BLL leader said removing the map "….is like saying those people didn't exist." Google temporarily removed the offending *eta* designation and, as of this writing, is 'reviewing' the matter. (Alabaster 2009)

[16] The Japanese *koseki* system remains highly paternalistic. The registration system requires that every Japanese citizen belong to a *koseki* headed by a male. As a rule, a woman must give up her own surname after marriage and take that of her husband. This often creates problems for working or divorced women as well as their children. Children born out of wedlock are labeled as such unless the father legally

government benefits it acquired to low-income non-Burakumin residing in Buraku neighborhoods.

Discriminatory practices by the BLL were not limited to non-Burakumin. The BLL sometimes denounced other Burakumin who by virtue of education or other means became "middle class" and did not identify themselves as exclusively Buraku. Upham (1987) maintains that although both the BLL and the government provided some level of economic security to Burakumin as a group, they denied individual Burakumin the freedom to merge into mainstream society.

Nevertheless, many young Burakumin, given the opportunity, moved out of Buraku neighborhoods, leaving behind an aging and dwindling population and a BLL without a base. With the expiration of the SML in 1992, the BLL also lost its main source of financial support. And, to compound matters, a wave of media reports on government corruption focused on the BLL and the misuse of local government funds (Johnston, 2006ab; 2008).

Despite this gloomy outlook, there is much to be learned from the BLL period of grassroots community development. Indeed, Buraku neighborhoods are where grassroots level machizukuri or community development has been the most successful in Japan. Yuzo Uchida, a renowned architect and town planner involved in Buraku community building for over 30 years, maintains that one of the Japanese models of community oriented machizukuri was started in the Buraku and that the Buraku model is more holistic and of a larger scale than the better known efforts in Japanese machizukuri movement in post –World War II Japan.[17]

The 'old' 1919 City Planning law (*toshi keikaku ho*), together with the Urban Building law (*shigaichi kenchikubutsu ho*), centralized urban planning (Watanabe 2007:46). A 'New Law' was introduced in 1968 (the year SML was enacted) but it kept the top-down principle of the Old Law; city planning had to be done in accordance with the various national and regional plans of the central government. Thus, the law gave priority to large scale planning over community based planning and allowed for the implementation of the quick and efficient central government plans. It accelerated rapid

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recognizes the child as his own. Adoptions are also openly registered in *koseki* , stigmatizing some children. Had the BLL also supported other efforts to end the *koseki* system of unequal treatment for women and children, the organization might have gained wider support and sympathy at least from women's rights organizations.

[17] According to Yuzo Uchida's unpublished notes, some successful Buraku neighborhood improvement cases are: 1) Yata neighborhood in Osaka city: Building schools based on community needs. Active educational programs. 2) Sumiyoshi neighborhood, Osaka city: Low-rise, neighborhood-communication friendly apartment buildings. Wheel chair friendly neighborhood. 3) Asaka neighborhood, Osaka city: Workers collectives, Collaborative project with nearby non-Buraku commercial neighborhood. 4) Hinode neighborhood, Osaka city: Cooperative housing, using leaseholds (from the local government) 5) Nishinari District, Osaka city: Healthcare for the elderly; Revitalization of local commercial area; Revitalization of local culture. 6) Kita Shiba District in Mino City, Osaka prefecture; Involving citizens through many workshops; Micro-credit service through community fund. 7) Senbon District, Kyoto city: Landscaping coordinating with adjacent neighborhoods; Active involvement of citizens to build new user-friendly public housing. 8) Kitakata District, Kita Kyushu city: Revived the neighborhood plaza; Built a user-friendly public apartment; Large scale community development project, collaborating with the local government. 9) Shitami District, Tsukuchino city: Involvement of the residents through many workshops; Combination of small scale neighborhood improvement project and large scale town planning method. 10) Kora Town Kuretake District: A neighborhood improvement committee organized by residents; Publicized the good points of the neighborhood to appeal to outsiders; Created small parks with streams. 11) Shima District, Gobo City: Long-term collaborative efforts with local government officials to realize user friendly cooperative housing.

economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s (Watanabe, 2007: 47). However, there was little space for local citizens to participate in the planning of their own neighborhood.

In the 'activist' 1960s the 'movement' for more participatory planning gathered steam but it was not until 1981 that first local ordinance spelling out the role of local citizens in town planning was adopted by Kobe City. The Kobe machizukuri ordinance included three important 'inventions': 1) A machizukuri council representative of the residents was established in small area improvement districts; 2) the 'expert dispatch system' provided machizukuri councils with professional consultants; and 3) a partnership system was established between the local government and the community to facilitate the small area improvements. The Kobe ordinance became a model and was copied by many local governments. (Watanabe, 2007: 51) However, the 'model' did not include financial assistance from the central government. Thus, most of machizukuri plans were implemented on a limited scale, and mostly in the non-physical field.

On the other hand, the SML passed in 1968 provided local governments working with community based Buraku organizations (particularly BLL branches) with the ample financial backing from the national government (up to 80% of the budget for each project was backed by the central government). With such a big financial backing, both physical and non-physical community development projects were possible in Dowa projects. As Uchida (2006) points out, Buraku machizukuri could therefore be viewed as leading examples of post World War II community development.

Uchida stresses that the good public housing with reasonably priced rent was built with intensive participation of the residents in the Buraku. The civic participation model of Dowa project involving the neighborhood could be a model for low income neighborhoods in general (personal communication with Uchida in October, 2008).

7.8 Machizukuri and Buraku

From 1950 through the 1990s, BLL grassroots organizations worked with Buraku neighborhoods, particularly in Western Japan, to improve the quality of life and environment for Burakumin. These efforts of BLL community building have been mostly overlooked by researchers of Japanese *machizukuri* and seldom acknowledged by 'mainstream' *machizukuri* leaders. The following Asaka neighborhood project is one of the typical Dowa machizukuri projects which are regarded as most successful.

The Asaka neighborhood project
Asaka is a typical Buraku neighborhood in western Osaka city. Prior to the 1960s, over 200 of the neighborhood's households were located on a dry riverbed that periodically flooded. Homes had neither tap water nor sewer connections; residents were forced to use public water taps and common toilets. Access to the neighborhood was blocked on the south by the Yamato River, the west by the Osaka City University campus and the east by the Tennoji-Abiko railway. Roads in and into the neighborhood were so narrow that motor vehicles could not pass and fire engines could not enter.

To compound matters, in 1957 the Osaka city government made plans to build a subway depot on the north side of the neighborhood. Ignoring neighborhood protests, the city went ahead with the project in 1960 and Asaka became an island, totally isolated from the rest of the city with only a single road built to serve the depot providing access to the neighborhood. The morale of the community plummeted and the

people, already poor, felt even more destitute and powerless. Change came gradually from the ground up. In 1976 the rail station issue was again taken up. It was then that the Asaka *chonaikai* (neighborhood association) helped establish a branch of the BLL. Working with the local parent teachers association and workers organizations (including the labor union representing the depot workers), the BLL-*chonaikai* began a campaign to remove the station. The struggle took another two decades, but the depot was eventually removed and the 28 acres on which it stood turned over to the neighborhood for redevelopment.

Under BLL leadership, Asaka neighborhood developed an alliance with the adjacent working class neighborhood of Sumiyoshi to develop a comprehensive neighborhood revitalization plan. The plan was drafted and implemented by the residents: they built parks, a community sports ground, a community pubic bath, a centre for disabled people, a primary school, a junior high school, and attractive public apartments. By most accounts, Yoshihiko Yamamoto was the key leader and catalyst for the transformation.

A Buraku community leader and his tactics
Yoshihiko Yamamoto, now 60 years old, is an extraordinary community leader and director of the Asaka Neighborhood BLL. [18] He views the Asaka neighborhood empowerment process as having four stages: 1) 1950s-1970s—the battle for decent public housing; 2) 1970-1975—organizing youth and women's groups, the battle against juvenile delinquency and low school grades; 3) 1975-1980—removal of the subway depot and the involvement of residents in community planning; 4) 1988—launching of the Asaka Community Development Council.

Yamamoto's career as an organizer began in the late 1960s. His family life was typical for Buraku at that time. They were extremely poor, and he was semi-literate without a stable job. Yamamoto recalls:

> *"We were living in a public apartment built in 1967. We got it through negotiation with the Osaka government. The apartment construction split the community because the government promised both the chonaikai and the BLL control. Learning of the duplicity, the organizations began to fight with each other. Eventually, the government gave 70 blocks to the BLL and 30 to the chonaikai. My mother came to Asaka and got housing from chonaikai. Because of this, BLL members shouted at us from outside denouncing my mother as a traitor. She had been suffering from heart problems and I was very angry at that time."*

In the small residents' meeting of ten families in his apartment block, he was appointed as the representative to negotiate with the Osaka city officials for further improvement of the neighborhood. He didn't know what he was supposed to do, so he sought a mentor from the BLL in nearby Yata neighborhood. Yata was renowned as an active Buraku neighborhood for its political engagement. Out of seven national leaders of the BLL, three came from Yata. His new mentor from Yata told him to study reading and writing by attending an evening literacy class in the neighborhood. After the class was finished, with the help of a dictionary, he spent a year reading a book that had been

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[18] This part about Yamamoto is based on the interview conducted in October 2008

given to him. "It was Chairman Mao's book about the technique of involving the masses in political movements," he told me. Out of this study, he learned to focus on the issues of day-to-day life. "I did not want to talk about general politics or ideology, as Buraku people were not interested."

> *"I also decided to focus on the community as a whole. Not private interests. We had serious fights between the chonaikai (the more conservative pro-government neighborhood association) and BLL based organizations. We hated each other while fighting for public housing. This taught me a lesson that we should find a common goal which no one can contest."*

After losing the battle against the construction of subway depot, in 1960, Yamamoto helped organize the Asaka Neighborhood Housing Demand Association. In 1969, Yamamoto and this group revived a moribund youth group of the Asaka BLL. The youth group tackled the poor school performance of Buraku kids. At the time, juvenile delinquency was rampant and most kids had grades inadequate to advance to a public high school. Students indulged in cigarette smoking, glue sniffing and playing hooky from class. The youth group began a program dubbed Education Safeguard. Yamamoto explains:

> *"When we went to school, the teachers used to say that Buraku kids do not study and hence have low performance. But how can they study well if their parents do not know how to read and write? Their family background was such that kids did not have any incentive to study. So we implemented a 70 day study camp, with sympathetic school teachers and the Buraku youth group. We worked with 13 kids who were about to take the entrance exam for high school. All 13 students passed the exam which was previously said to be too difficult for Buraku kids. This gave us enormous trust from Buraku parents as everyone wanted their kids to go to a good school. They knew education was important to break the chain of poverty. But they did not know how."*
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> *"When we started a BLL Asaka branch in 1965, people were only thinking about their housing and jobs. They did not know what was necessary for the community, but I thought we need to put the community first and not the individual needs since that would stop the fighting."*

Community Empowerment
Asaka residents were mostly junk dealers, day labourers and peddlers of various kinds. They used hand trolleys to carry junk and old materials; none had a driver's license. On the other hand, at Yata, the nearby *Buraku*, there was a driver's license circle which taught people how to drive and how to get a license. Yamamoto felt Yata was far more advanced at providing job training to residents.

> *"When a man from Asaka went to Yata asking to join the circle, they suggested we start our own. They said, 'if you are silent and do nothing, you remain ignorant. Why don't you empower the entire neighborhood by starting your own license circle at Asaka? We can help you starting up.' So we started the Asaka driving license circle."*

> *"Next, there was job training. Some women at Asaka noticed that there were cooking staff working for primary and secondary schools. They asked me how they could become one of those, as they admired the full time job. I told them that you have to get a license to be a cook for schools. In order to be a licensed cook, you have to pass the national exam. So you need to know how to read and write. They understood what they had to do. We started a course to study for the exam in addition to literacy classes. Seventy people wanted to study. So we invited an instructor and taught them at the BLL neighborhood hall. For a year, three days a week at night, they studied and passed the exam and got the job. Of course, they were very happy."*

The literacy movement initiated by the BLL groups like Yamamoto's had an enormous impact on the Buraku people who were still mostly illiterate in the 1950-60s. Although prior to WWII, Japan claimed to be nearly 100% literate, there were still illiterate people at the bottom of society and most of them were either Burakumin or resident Koreans who were brought to Japan during World War II. In the literacy class, teachers were mostly BLL leaders or non-Buraku supporters who got involved in the Buraku community movement.[19]

Yamamoto's life was typical of Buraku youth in the 1960s: he had dropped out of primary school in the 3rd grade since he could neither pay the school lunch fees nor do the homework. As he describes it:

> *"At five, I started working helping my mother, my aunt, and my grandmother. I helped my mother early in the morning before going to school, worked with my aunt after school until seven o'clock. Then I helped my grandmother at night until 11 o'clock. I could not buy school textbooks nor study at home. I never did the homework. In those days, a school lunch cost 435 yen per month. But our family of five survived with 300 yen per day, buying five cups of rice with that money. We mostly ate rice gruel. How can a child of such a family pay 435 yen per month for school meals?"*

His teachers accused him of not doing homework and not paying the meal fees. So he stopped eating the meals.

> *"So I didn't eat lunch. But one day, one of my classmates accused me for stealing money which I never did. I was so angry that I quit school there and then."*

His parents were peddlers of groceries who would walk long distances selling vegetables from house to house. When he was 11, they split up and his mother and he had to work in Yata for several years as his father had 'sold' them to pay for his gambling debt. He understands the destitute feeling of his father and was never critical. Several years after the split, his mother and his siblings moved to *Asaka* where she was able to get a welfare subsidy and move into a public apartment.

He believes the weakness of his father was derived from poverty and discrimination.

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[19] Many of those who came to the class were women in their 50s and 60s; they started to write about their histories which vividly illustrated how they felt about emancipation through learning (Yamamoto 2002).

"My mother used to denounce him as a poor provider since he started losing his grocery customers. He tried hard to be a good seller, and he learned in the vegetable market how to check the freshness and quality by tapping the vegetables. I think he tried to be a good merchant but some people told his customers that he was a Buraku. That stopped them buying from him. They would say, 'how can one buy vegetables from a pollutant'? And my father lost his customers."[20]

Removal of the depot and redevelopment of the neighborhood
Yamamoto's years of organizing paid off with the removal of the train depot in 1988 and the vacant land being turned over to the community for development. But, that struggle alone took over 10 years. In 1976, the Asaka neighborhood comprehensive planning committee was launched. The committee conducted a door-to-door survey of the entire neighborhood; out of 928 households, the survey questionnaires were answered by 89%. This was done with the full support of the City University academics and architectural groups.

> *"We persuaded Osaka City University to help us conduct an intensive survey of the neighborhood to see the reality of our neighborhood. Before, the university did nothing good to us and student radicals once burned down our apartment! Now, we persuaded them to do common good,"*

The questionnaire design group included public officials, teachers and neighborhood residents. This helped the outside collaborators understand the reality of discrimination. After spending 18 months analyzing the data, the figures were released to the public. Education, jobs, and marriages were still discriminatory and the Buraku people lived with enormous constraints and difficulty. The survey helped unite the neighborhood and win allies from the subway depot employees and the staff of local schools. Using the data to support their arguments, the group began negotiations with the city which eventually agreed to demolish the depot. According to Yamamoto:

> *"The concrete data showed how we were disadvantaged: early school drop-outs were 27 times the Osaka regional average; high divorce rates; single motherhood; high unemployment rates; higher health risks; no coverage by medical insurance; and, three times the number of disabled people than average because of the poor hygienic environment and the hard labor that ruined health. Wage rates for Asaka residents were only about 60 percent of the Osaka average. The public housing was so poor that five or six members were living on six tatami mats in a two tatami mat space."*[21]
> *"We worked on the data analysis for one and a half years, and I spent two weeks memorizing it before the negotiation. I knew every individual mentioned in the report and when I argued, I substantiated our demands with the data. They asked why we needed 500 public housing units. I said there are*

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[20] In fact, vegetable sales were one of the traditional jobs of peddlers who were mostly from *Buraku* in Tokugawa period.
[21] In Japan, rooms are measured by the dimensions of a *tatami* mat. Made of rice straw, the dimensions of a *tatami* are standardized at 90 cm by 180 cm—3 feet by 6 feet (1.62 square meters).

> *944 families and 2800 people. I used to go to the harbor late at night and read the data and memorized it because I did not want others to worry about the meeting. So I read the data all alone."*

As they began negotiating with the government for the purchase of the Buraku's riverbed homes, there was an economic bubble and the price shot up about 10 times. Some residents were attracted by the money offered and wanted to sell immediately.

> *"But we patiently persuaded every household in the riverbed to work together so that every household would get the same amount. It took us five years to complete the deal but every one was given the same price."*
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> *"When the government was buying the land of 202 households on the riverbed, there were 74 resident Korean households. They were illiterate but they owned the land, they insisted. I asked them if they had a sales bond. They said no, but said they had paid the money to such and such a person in the Buraku. I questioned the Buraku land owners, and they claimed they had not sold the land or received any money. Without a receipt, it is hard to prove ownership, but I trusted the Korean people since they must not have forgotten the money they paid. 'I told the Buraku guys who took the money, 'those Korean people saved money out of hard labour and bought the land. Five-hundred thousand yen is a big amount of money.*[22] *So you would not have forgotten. Do not cheat them'. They denied it but eventually they acknowledged that they did sell. I could not let them cheat."*

Through Yamamoto's efforts, the land owned by the Korean residents was purchased by the government and special arrangements were made to admit them into the Buraku neighborhood public apartments, after the completion. That was the first case in Osaka which allowed non-Burakumin to use a Buraku facility (Yamamoto 2002:112).

The depot was closed down in 1987 and after that, the huge site was left open for the community to develop. Working over a five year period, in cooperation with nearby non-Buraku neighborhoods, the Buraku community built an overseas engineer training center, a medical clinic, a middle school, an assisted nursing home, a day care service center, and numerous community gardens with streams and landscaping. There are also job training centers and community business companies which hire the Buraku people and people with disabilities.

7.9 Buraku culture and identity

In spite of the remarkable community building histories of their community, Yamamoto and other leaders feel many problems remain even as new ones arise. For instance, the increase of intermarriages with non-*Buraku*, does not bring real integration since so many of the Buraku hide their identity and often don't inform their children of their family histories which creates a considerable amount of stress and isolation for the adults and confusion for children. There is an issue of not being able to find any positive cultural identity attached to Buraku particularly among the youths. Since the 1980s,

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[22] At the current exchange rate, 500,000 yen would be about $5,000.

some BLL leaders like Yamamoto have been exchanging ideas with Japan's other indigenous minorities, the Ainu and the Okinawan.[23] Yamamoto strongly admires their cultural integrity and ethnic identity:

> *"We went to Nibudani in Hokkaido where there are still Ainu kotan (hamlets). Inspired by us, they organized Ainu Liberation League and since then, we have had a long-term relationship with them. They actually are ahead of us in appreciating their own culture by teaching Ainu language, dancing and singing. Outside Hokkaido, they do not get any subsidies even if they do such activities. But they do it at their own expense. They do not talk much about the discrimination they suffer from, but they teach their cultural heritage quietly.*
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> *There is a young artist called Bikki Sunagawa who left the community and went to the US, where he encountered reggae. He reflected on his own identity and came back to Hokkaido. Now he plays pongoli, the Ainu guitar, and has become a proud Ainu artist. I also admire the young Ainu Rebels who are creating the young Ainu culture even though their music is hip-hop."[24] "When youngsters and middle class Buraku families leave Buraku, the BLL denounces them and spits on them, saying 'never come back'. They never accept them even when they want to come back. But Ainu people leave their door open and welcome anyone who comes back." "I also admire Okinawans. Tokushin Yamamoto, for example is an Okinawan leader who revived Okinawan history and made it 'trendy' in order to attract many mainland Japanese to his small village of Yoshitani. There, the villagers challenged authorities who wanted to destroy Okinawan culture: not with violence, but with cultural power. Every year, 100,000 people from all over Japan are drawn to Yoshitani for their cultural festival. As a result, a lot of Japanese youngsters love Okinawa and they study Okinawan dance and music. But, what about us the Burakumin? We are severed from our cultural heritage. The BLL did not value our culture and Buraku youth did not hear any positive stories from their parents or grandparents. So, Buraku youth have nothing to be proud of. We have many pop singers and TV actors from Buraku but they hide their identity. When becoming famous, resident Koreans come out and declare their identity. Buraku stars do not."*

Born in 1968 to Buraku parents, Nobuhiko Kadooka, a free-lance journalist, does not remember any incident in which he was discriminated against for being Burakumin, perhaps because his father worked as a sales clerk in a department store and lived in a company dorm for many years. However, he was careful not mention his Buraku ancestry when being interviewed for his first position as newspaper reporter, nor did he mention his interest in studying Buraku issues in college. Although he got the job, he left for a career as a free-lance journalist after a few years partly because he was disappointed with the narrow mindedness of the media which viewed the Buraku community as a single entity while ignoring its diversity. He maintains that there are different Burakus with different histories from east to west. There are varieties of

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[23] There have been international cultural and strategy exchanges with Asian minorities and slum dwellers as well. For instance, the Asaka BLL branch has 'networked' with ACHR (Asian Coalition for Housing Rights), a nonprofit social justice organization headquartered in Thailand.

[24] The Ainu Rebels can be viewed on YouTube.

traditional occupations and livelihoods pursued by different communities and local cultures were rich in diversity. Yet they were now viewed as a single category of 'Buraku'. His two years of intensive interviews with more than 100 Buraku youths were published as a 2003 book titled "The Youth in the Discriminated Hamlets" (Kadooka 2003). The book illustrates how Buraku youths have diverse views about their own identity and how the relationship between them and their communities is complex.

Self-conscious inquiry and renewal of Buraku identity
The Buraku-born freelance writer Yoshiho Uehara is much younger than Kadooka. He finds his community food original and unique. Born in 1973, he aggressively takes in his Buraku identity and cherishes his memories of having 'special Buraku food' as the topic of study. Although Buraku food invokes nostalgia to Buraku originated people, they could not mention it outside Buraku for fear of being known to be a Burakumin. He set out on a two year world trip researching the 'soul foods' of the world, trying to share the feeling of his 'soul food' with other depressed minorities. Visiting the most discriminated minorities such as Romas in Europe and the ex-Untouchables in India, he eats their food and shares their history and experience of persecution.

His childhood memories of Buraku food are also associated with memories of discrimination. Not so much that he was discriminated against, but more as he saw his fellow Buraku people being afraid of revealing their identities and hiding the nostalgia of the Buraku food they were used to. Foods such as *saiboshi* (dried horse meat), *aBurakasu* (intestinal sausage made from left-over beef and pork), *kogori* (cooked animal giblets in gelatin), or *chagayu* (rice gruel cooked in tea).

During his travels, Uehara finds that many famous ethnic menus were derived from the poor and the deprived: American fried chicken originated in the kitchens of African-American slaves; *feijoada*, the famous ethnic food of Brazil also originated from the kitchens of African slaves. Calling this 'soul food' and sharing the history of poverty and discrimination, his narratives lead to a transformation of the Buraku cultural paradigm from a negative view to a positive one. The very notion of taboos involving ritual pollution, which puts them at the bottom of the social hierarchy, can be thrown away once their food is positively appreciated for its cultural uniqueness.

Discussing *habitus* as the 'durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations', Bourdieu (1977: 78) argues culture as the accumulation of habitus as the power to create culture. Repetition of day-to-day activities such as eating food, smelling the leaves, and listening to dialects create what you are and shared experiences accumulate the emotion of being in the same 'ethnic' community (see also Karner, 2007). Ethnicity has been a fundamental source of meaning and social differentiation yet their manifestations are deeply altered by the recent globalization. Ethnicity is being specified as a source of meaning and identity to be melted not with other ethnicities but under broader principles of cultural self-definition such as religion, nation and gender (Castells 2004: 57).

An emerging trend in Japan's urban sub-culture gives a positive spin to 'ethnic food' and to ethnic minority's unique history.[25] Thus, Korean, Okinawan, Ainu, South American born Niseis, and Buraku sub-culture can all be appreciated. Discussing reflexivity as the key to recreate one's identity, Giddens (1984, 1991) explains it both as

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[25] There are many websites showing how to cook such menus. *Saiboshi* is now sold in some big department stores as one of typical 'Osaka food', and there are some restaurants which provide Buraku menu. *Chagayu* and *kogori* are even served in the top-end Japanese restaurants.

a subjective process of the individual's self-conscious inquiry and an inquiry about one's relationship with other social groups. Reflexivity creates a new identity for the individual, and can ultimately lead to the transformation of the ethnic identity.

The BLL as an organization brought about a big socio-economic improvement for the community. Yet its denunciation tactics and blaming of the outside world for everything did not give answers to the individuals' search for a new and positive identity. The younger Buraku generation is still struggling, continuing the inquiry about oneself and about the community. This inquiry requires interactions with outsiders to assist in the creation of newly formed mirror images on Buraku culture, images from which new ethnic and community identities can be conceived.

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