

Changing the Images of Buraku: A Challenge to Human Rights Education¹⁾

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Translated by Joseph HANKINS***

1. Into the Field

September 9th, 2002, I, Kurosaka, began fieldwork on Buraku issues. Having settled down in a Buraku community close to JR Oyama station in Oyama City, Tochigi Prefecture, in the Kantō region, I am engaged in “participant observation,” working weekdays and occasional weekends at the “Buraku Liberation League, Tochigi” and the “Human Rights Center, Tochigi” (the two organizations are in the same building and are deeply related).

I became interested in this topic when asked by Toda Makoto san²⁾, Secretary of the Tochigi Branch of the Buraku Liberation League (BLL), whether I would be interested in doing part time work for them. This occurred while on a summer excursion to Tochigi to practice interview techniques as a part of Fukuoka’s “Ethnological Methods” course. Coupled with discussion via email with my advisor, Fukuoka, my daily life experiences (examples follow) became my point of embarkation “into the field.”

To: Professor Fukuoka

From: Ai Kurosaka

Date: Thu, 22 Aug 2002

Subject: An Uncle’s story

I had just come back to my parents’ house from Tochigi and found my uncle, who had retired in spring, over for a visit. We started telling each other what we

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had been up to recently, which continued congenially for a short while. Then, when I mentioned that I had just gotten back from a Buraku community in Tochigi, expression of shock and bewilderment spread across my uncle's face. "Why would a young person like yourself have any interest in a subject like *that?*...."

My uncle continued: "The *Dōwa* measures were conducted for many years as part of governmental policy. I wonder if the problem hasn't already been resolved completely; you know, we've thrown all our tax money into these measures and I think the outcome has been good. And as a result, discrimination is pretty much gone."

On the other hand, my uncle related the following story about people from Buraku communities. He had heard this story while he was in the Kansai region.

There was a woman from a Buraku community who worked in a branch of a large supermarket that my uncle worked and who made no effort to hide the fact that she was from a Buraku community. One day, this woman brought her fiancé to work with her. Listening to their conversation, the manager of the store asked them, "Are you both from a Buraku?" My uncle continued, "From that point, it all took about two years. The BLL contacted the manager, telling him that what he had done was discriminatory, and they decided to press charges, involving a lawyer. It took about two years to resolve the issue. The store manager lost his health in that time and had to quit the job. All of this, just because he asked 'Are you from a Buraku?'"

"There was another story, too. I heard that a woman from a Buraku married a man who was not from a Buraku community, and her goal in all of this was to purify her bloodline. And, as soon as she had a kid, she went straight back to her home...."

It was now my turn to be shocked, having this negative representation of a Buraku community unfold right before me by my uncle. Even while insisting, "there is no more discrimination," his words themselves were full of prejudice.

In response to my uncle, who believed that "discrimination was just a delusion of victimization on the part of people from Buraku communities," I told him the story of Aoki Hideko san (female, in her thirties) who, though she had thought that discrimination no longer existed, was warned by one of her colleagues, the moment she became a school teacher: "You've heard of *Yotsu*³⁾, right? They have poisoned the well." My uncle, not missing a beat, responded: "Do you really believe that story? Even assuming it's true, you still have to work

hard to find someone with such a story. And the Buraku Liberation League feels a need to protect its own existence. They go beyond that need, 5 or 10 times, constantly making an issue of small things." With this, my uncle succinctly robbed this story of discrimination of all of its value.

My uncle and father are from the north, from Niigata, and recount never having heard of Buraku before they entered the working world. As a result, all of my uncle's opinions about Buraku are completely formed through his experiences with people in his work place or in his neighborhood, all since he reached adulthood. Judging only from this one story of his, it was evident that my uncle had never really spoken with someone who had experienced discrimination. My uncle could only have heard stories like these in a place where there were no people from a Buraku community.

One statement of my uncle's left a particularly strong impression on me: "I told you many things about them, but I don't think that people from a Buraku are different from you or me." I do not think that he was making this up, but I do not think that my uncle, who does not have even the barest connection with anyone from a Buraku, can really understand his or her situation.

2. Living in the Buraku

As part of the agreement between Fukuoka and myself, there has been a daily exchange of field notes via email. Additionally, these emails have been sent over Fukuoka's seminar mailing list, eliciting a response from a wider audience.

My first week of work, I commuted between Sayama City in Saitama Prefecture and Oyama City in Tochigi Prefecture, two and a half hours one-way. It was two weeks later when I moved to in the Buraku community in Oyama.

To: [socio-fieldwork] Dear friends

From: Ai Kurosaka

Date: Mon, 9 Sep 2002

Subject: I'm too sleepy to death...

Because of stress, I woke up before dawn, around 3am. As I was thinking to myself, "I have to sleep, I have to sleep," the alarm clock went off.

I arrived at the "Human Rights Center, Tochigi" just past 8:40, to find that Toda Makoto san (male, in his forties) and Shirato Fusayo san (female, in her forties) were already there. Toda san had told me that morning that the next day

there would be a meeting starting at 1pm during which I would be expected to introduce myself and explain my motive for being here over the next year. This was because the Tochigi Branch's finances were less than satisfactory and there were probably people who were wondering how the Branch could afford to hire a part time employee.

Toda san had told me that my first assignment was to make a list of things I would need to set up apartment for myself. He suggested that I write out a list of several things and add at the bottom "If you are not using any of the following, is there any way I could borrow?" Then I was to pass the list to people at the Branch; I could probably get a lot of the stuff from them. I borrowed a computer and started to write. There was a lot of stuff.

Murakami Kazuko san (female, in her forties) was going to lend me a pot, towels, and detergent. Yasuge Tokiko san (female, in her forties) was going to lend me a television! Shirato san, a chest of drawers, and Onozaki Yoko san (female, in her twenties), a vacuum cleaner. Ishizuka Giju san (male, in his sixties) even told me that he would bring me rice!

To: [socio-fieldwork] Dear friends

From: Ai Kurosaka

Date: Tue, 17 Sep 2002

Subject: Furukawa's story

Furukawa Tsutomu san (male, in his fifties) is a "man of many faces." In the Buraku Liberation League office, he is a commanding figure, typically attired in a two-piece gray suit with gold-rimmed sunglasses. At first glance, he looks "scary."

However, behind that imposing exterior, Furukawa san is extremely kind and always equipped with a pleasant story. "In elementary school we had to draw a picture over our summer vacation. My family was very poor, and I had never been to the ocean. However, I found a picture of an ocean scene in a calendar and, looking at that, drew the ocean. And would you believe, I actually won a prize (*laughing*). You know there was no way I could tell people I had never been to the ocean. The fact that I lied to my teacher still pains me to this day (*laughing*)."

Another of Furukawa's faces is that of a representative of a company. On the back of his business card is a list of some eight different business associates. The apartment building that I moved into this morning, "Casa Galleria," is one of the properties he manages.

He showed up this morning at 10, dressed in a jersey sweatshirt, bringing with him a refrigerator for me to use over the next year. He then brought over his toolbox and put a screen door onto my apartment. A gas stove and a *futon* soon followed. His wife, Akemi san, brought me a folding table, two lamps, and a toaster oven. Due to their kindness, I have been living comfortably from day one here in my new apartment. I am extremely thankful.

To: [socio-fieldwork] Dear friends

From: Ai Kurosaka

Date: Wed, 18 Sep 2002

Subject: My first experience with "*sējikkara*"

Everyone at the office celebrated my arrival by getting together at Furukawa's snack bar for a drink. Furukawa san is called "Master" there. Wada Ken'ichi san (male, in his fifties), Chair of the BLL Tochigii, Toda san and others went home around 8, but Aoki Hideko san, who is always up for drinking, and I, whose apartment is within a stone's throw, stayed behind. "Master" brought the conversation around to "*sējikkara*."

"So what did you think of the *sējikkara* — tasty?" (I responded: "Truthfully, I didn't like it that much.") "Really? That might just be a food eaten here within the Buraku. My classmates who weren't from Buraku had never heard of it either. But for us, it's the taste of home, you know. I ate it from the time I was little, and I have to admit I love it."

Being from "outside a Buraku," I was incapable of understanding the appeal of this "Buraku Food" *sējikkara* (dregs of boiled pig lard), which depressed me slightly. I thought that saying that I did not like *sējikkara* would be taken as equivalent to a rejection of Buraku culture. Thinking about the words we were exchanging, I could not help but think that Furukawa san himself was worried that I might reject Buraku culture. However, he did not reject either *sējikkara*, a piece of Buraku culture, or myself who could not accept it. I was so happy. (At this point if I had been told that not being able to understand the appeal of *sējikkara* was equivalent to being incapable of understanding Buraku culture, I would have gone back to Saitama crying. I thought how lucky I was to have someone as capable of handling sensitive issues as Furukawa san.)

I had really wanted to report to you just how different my daily experience

in the Buraku was from the images my uncle held, but I wonder if I have really done that.

3. The Problem Lies in the Negative Images

To: [socio-fieldwork] Dear friends

From: Yasunori Fukuoka

Date: Tue, 29 Oct 2002

Subject: The negative images of Buraku

During fieldwork practice in 1996, Wada san, the then Secretary-General of BLL Tochigi, gave an hour lecture to my students. He pointed out that the source of a recent problematic language use by a Buddhist priest, which had revealed his discriminatory view of Burakumin, actually lied in the fact that he had probably been introduced to the Buraku issue in a negative way and had accumulated negative images of the Buraku people as a result.

I also recognize that the real issue for Buraku discrimination lies in the “negative images of Buraku.” The Chiba “Survey of Citizen’s Recognition of Human Rights Issues” which I conducted in 1999 revealed “negative images” as a central point, the results of which I would like to share with everyone.

Below you will find a graph that displays the results of a multiple regression analysis. For those interested in the original wording of the questionnaire itself, please refer to *Survey Report of Citizen’s Recognition of Human Rights Issues, 1999* (Chiba Human Rights Education Center, 2000).

Strength of Factors Influencing “Perception of Relative’s Marital Issues”

Factor	Correlation Coefficient	Beta Coefficient
Sex	.054 *	.071 **
Age	.208 **	.220 **
Education	-.081 **	.015
Class Consciousness	.019	.008
Knowledge of <i>Dōwa</i> Issues	.024	-.004
<i>Honne</i> (Real Intentions)	-.258 **	-.066 **
<i>Tatemae</i> (Stated Principles)	.030	.052 *
Sympathy	.115 **	.088 **

Images of Negativity	-.249 **	-.211 **
Images of Heterogeneity	-.325 **	-.262 **
Belief that Discrimination		
Does Not Exist Any More	.134 **	.075 **
"Let Sleeping Dogs Lie"	-.139 **	-.016
Involvement in the Issue	.081 **	.049 *
Feeling of Reverse Discrimination	-.170 **	-.049 *
Support for the Movement		
and Related Education	.032	-.030
Importance of Tradition	-.205 **	-.084 **
Susceptibility to External Pressure	-.204 **	-.108 **
Commitment to Own Ideals	.123 **	.045 *

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ is significant $N = 1689$ $R^2 = .284$

I will omit a detailed explanation. What I would really like to draw to your attention is not the correlation coefficient but the beta coefficient. The larger the absolute value of the number, the greater influence that factor exerts on one's "Perception of Relative's Marital Issues."

One category to which I would like to pay particular attention is the amount of "Knowledge of *Dōwa* Issues," the beta value for which is exceptionally close to zero. This means that how much one knows about *Dōwa* issues is absolutely irrelevant to how they respond to the news that one of their relatives wants to marry someone of Buraku heritage. This is to say that increasing students' or the general public's knowledge of Buraku issues will not lead to the elimination of discrimination.

Above all, though, I would like to draw attention to the large absolute beta coefficient value of the "Images of Heterogeneity," followed by the "Images of Negativity."

A "heterogeneous view of a *Dōwa* area" is the internalization of such views as "people from *Dōwa* areas are born different by birth," "people from *Dōwa* areas are outcasts," and "people from *Dōwa* areas are *not* quite the same as those not from such places."

A "negative view of a *Dōwa* area" is the internalization of such views as "it's lucky not to have been born in a *Dōwa* area," "when I hear a '*Dōwa* area,' all that comes to mind is a dark image," "I really pity people from *Dōwa* areas,"

“*Dōwa* areas are filled with poor people,” “*Dōwa* areas are frightening places.”

According to the above statistical analysis, the greater degree to which one holds these images, the more apt one is to object to one’s relative marrying someone from a Buraku. We can thus say that the real target of *Dōwa* and human rights education then is to ascertain how to dismantle these “negative and heterogeneous images.”

In what we have written so far, it appears that the results of our statistical analysis and the contents of Mr. Wada’s lecture “match” perfectly: the “negative and heterogeneous images” surrounding Buraku are of key importance. However, when we actually went to Tochigi to conduct this study, we had just heard and agreed with Wada’s point, which may be the actual reason why we had focused on the possibility of verifying the “negative and heterogeneous images,” or so I came to believe. Truthfully, though, this point does not matter so much. The intuition of a leader of the Buraku liberation movement and the statistical analysis of a sociologist match up beautifully. The central problem then becomes how to put this into practice.

4. Is it Possible to Change Images of the Buraku?

As is apparent in BLL leader Wada’s lecture, non-Buraku people’s avoidance of or discrimination against people from a Buraku community varies according to how they view Buraku communities. The statistical analysis also indicates the same: the perception of Buraku communities is the central issue.

Human rights education movements are presently active throughout Japan, but how effective are they?

To: [socio-fieldwork] Dear friends

From: Ai Kurosaka

Date: Wed, 16 Oct 2002

Subject: Human rights lecture: “???????”

After work, the neighboring town, Ōhira, held its first “Human Rights Leaders Training Lecture Series” in the Community Center. The lecturer was Mr. X, consultant of the “Social Educational Division of the Shimo-Tsuga Educational Offices.” The lecture was entitled, “Sharpening Human Rights Awareness: Human Rights and Our Lives.” “Human Rights,” “Human Rights” was mentioned time and time again, but what exactly did this mean? Is this man

going to be able to address some sort of almighty, transcendent "human rights" not limited issues of Buraku or disability discrimination? If so, I will be impressed.

To put it bluntly, I felt betrayed by his lecture. I mean this man was really incompetent. It is a little much to describe every detail of his boring lecture one by one, so instead I will focus on what exactly I thought was wrong with his workshop.

1. Irresponsible structure

Mr. X's methodology consisted of, in a short period of time, introducing such diverse subjects as "Deceptive Pictures," "Issues of Discrimination against Women," e.g. a biased assumption that all surgeons are male, "Issues of Discrimination against Buraku Communities," and "*Hinoe Uma*⁴," and lumping them all together under one overarching label of "prejudice." He proceeded to insist, "Since we all have such discriminatory misconceptions, we need to work together to eliminate them!" If just saying, "Let's get rid of our misconceptions!" is actually going to eliminate them, then discrimination itself is already conquered.

2. "Self-important" presentations

Mr. X had some workshop attendees participate in a game to test out the prevalence of the thought that "all surgeons are male." Throughout this workshop, he constantly referred to this thought as a "mistaken prejudice," and contrasted it with "correct consciousness." This labeling itself made us uncomfortable.

3. Meaningless questions, meaningless work

"1966 was *Hinoe Uma*. I want you to write down how many babies you think were born that year.... All right, do you all have guesses down? The answer is 1,369,974. Which is low, isn't it? This is due to superstition." What is this question? There is absolutely no need to teach people the exact number of children born. The man sitting in front of me muttering under his breath, "What is the point of this?"

The main point of this workshop was an activity entitled "Creating a Human Rights Newspaper," for which we were broken into groups. There was nothing special about this "human rights newspaper." He had brought

normal newspapers, passed them out, and had us cut and paste to a separate sheet of paper articles we thought were related to human rights. That was it. Each group then had to hold up their new “newspaper” and explain it in front of the others. “Everyone, you have created an amazing set of newspapers. If you just shift what you are looking for, and search for human rights issues, the newspaper you read everyday suddenly reads totally differently. This right here sharpens your awareness of human rights issues.” What!?!? This is “human rights consciousness”? Is this guy serious?

4. A “workshop” in name only

I have taken two “workshop” style courses up to this point. One was at Saitama University for an “Inter-cultural Relations” course. Foreign exchange students made up about one third of the class. The second was an extension of a course on gender at the “Human Rights Center, Tochigi.” There was about the same number of men and women enrolled in this course.

In these workshops, each participant speaks from his or her own subjective experience. In this setting, unlike daily life, the minority voice receives equal time and space to present itself. Actually, it gets more than that: if anything, weight is placed on that voice. Workshops thus become a location for the equal exchange of voices.

This workshop, on the other hand, can rightly be called a workshop in name only. Mr. X held all the answers, and there was no exchange among members of the groups.

To: [socio-fieldwork] Dear friends

From: Ai Kurosaka

Date: Wed, 6 Nov 2002

Subject: Mindset of the discriminator

On November 6th, there was the final lecture course of the “Human Rights Leaders Training Lecture Series” held at Tomita Assembly Hall, in Ōhira Town. The course’s title was “Learning from the Pain of Discrimination.” I had asked in advance what form the course would take and was told that representatives from the five *Dōwa* assembly halls in Ōhira would speak to our groups, one representative per group.

Kawada Kunio san (male, in his sixties) spoke to my group. Actually he did not “speak” to us; instead, he played the role of moderator and had us each speak

our thoughts in turn.

Man A (sixties, head of the self-governance association)

Mr. A: I am originally from Matsudo in Chiba Prefecture. I had never heard of *Dōwa* until I moved to this area for work. As a result, I can't say that I really know anything about *Dōwa* discrimination. Why would anyone discriminate? Hmm... When I was a child, there was a group of *Shin-heimin* living nearby. They lived in these slums, had a low standard of living, and didn't really come to school very often so they frequently were teased.

Kawada san: "*Shin-heimin*" refers to people of Buraku descent and is itself considered discriminatory language.

Mr. A: Really? I had no idea. But you know, discrimination has actually remained because of all this insistence of *Dōwa* this and *Dōwa* that.

Kawada san: That "let sleeping dogs lie" policy is no good. Because they are not really sleeping, they are just pretending to.

Woman B (sixties)

Ms. B: I was raised in the northern part of Tochigi Prefecture and therefore grew up not knowing anything about *Dōwa*. After I first heard of them though, I thought back and realized that the issue had been around me all along and I had just not known. When I got engaged, my parents told me that they had "thoroughly researched everything on my partner, so there was no problem." At that time, I had no idea what they were talking about but after I was married, my mother-in-law explained all sorts of things to me, and I realized what my own parents had been talking about.

Woman C (about thirty years old)

Ms. C maintained a stiff expression, her eyes locked downward. She finally opened her mouth for the first time when her turn came around.

Ms. C: I am from Kami-Fukuoka in Saitama Prefecture. There, I had never heard anything about all of this. Then I moved here to get married, and my daughter came home one day with a special hand out from school. That was the first that I had heard of it. I really know absolutely nothing. (She is told that she should study up.) Study? What should I study? Should I study the history of *Dōwa*? Is that a good start?

Man D (early forties, junior high school teacher)

Mr. D: I went through the *Dōwa* educational program in school. I guess a notice about *Dōwa* education got sent to my home from school one day. I got home and, bam, my mom told me different stuff from what I had just learned in my class, which was rough. My mom actually told me the exact opposite of what we had learned in class. I had no idea which to believe. If I hadn't had that class, I would have bought everything my mother told me, which is a scary thought.

And then, when I got married, my fiancé's family researched my background. I'm not from a Buraku but still they investigated my background. I got to understand first hand what an unpleasant experience this is.

Ms. B changed the subject with a question:

Ms. B: So, do *Dōwa* people really get some sort of priority when they apply for driver's licenses?

Kawada san: Yes. They get a discount on driver's licenses. And not just on regular licenses but on large-sized vehicle licenses as well.

Ms. B was silent for a while, and it looked like she was lost in thought. Seeing this, I unintentionally asked, "Who told you that people from *Dōwa* are prioritized?"

Ms. B: Hmmm, well, you know, I sorta keep a shop and kind of heard from a customer....

Kurosaka: And you think it's unfair that they get privileged?

Ms. B: No, ummm, you know I had just heard that and wanted to make sure it was true, that's all.

Kawada san: You absolutely should ask if you don't know.

Still smiling, Kawada san looked over at me, but I had the feeling that there was something slightly embarrassed in his gaze. Ugh, had I gone too far?

Mr. A added the following toward the end of the meeting:

Mr. A: My son also says that if people didn't bring it up so often, that

discrimination would just go away by itself. This discrimination, you know, I really get the impression it's all pretty much gone. When I was a kid, there were these *Shin-heimin* around you know. And once one boy had a fight with one of them and he beat the kid up. Then the whole group came back at him. It was a one on one fight, but the whole group suddenly came after him — what is with this? This group identity just doesn't go away. All this discrimination actually comes from there. As long as this group identity doesn't go away.... Wouldn't it just be better if all these Buraku just disappeared?

What is with that conclusion? I looked eyes with Mr. D and in a flurry said, "No! What needs to disappear is not the Buraku but the discrimination. There is no reason for the Buraku themselves to go away!" And with that, the discussion time was over. Mr. A muttered something about not agreeing with me.

Mr. A was insisting three mutually contradictory points: 1. "Discrimination is pretty much gone," 2. "Discrimination will just ease away by itself," and 3. "Discrimination is not going anywhere." It was enough to make some one yell, what the hell are you thinking?! However, if you stop to think about it, at the base of all three of these points is the message "I am not planning on doing a thing to work against discrimination." Mr. A was consistently speaking from this position. And then his conclusion is "If the Buraku themselves go away, the discrimination will follow." Dangerous, this man.

The former lecture is an example of a course that was useless to conduct, that would have been better left undone. The latter provided insight into the mindset of people from outside the Buraku and was certainly interesting for me, but it is doubtful that it actually changed any of the participants' viewpoints.

So what should be done? I am not really sure. However, for this summer's "Ethnological Methods" practice survey, I will be on the receiving end. In fact, Toda san and Professor Fukuoka are planning on leaving the entire thing to me. I had better think of something by then.

Notes

- 1) An early version of this paper was presented at Activists' Forum at the 13th Biennial Conference of the Japanese Studies Association of Australia, Queensland University of

Technology, Brisbane (3 July 2003).

- 2) In this paper, Japanese names are written with the family name first, as is customary in Japan. Also, in observance of Japanese custom, the nominal suffix “san” has been added to the end of names.
- 3) *Yotsu* means ‘four’ and is a discriminatory way to describe people from a Buraku community. It refers to Buraku’s historical dealing with four-footed animals.
- 4) The 43rd year in the traditional sexagenary cycle. Women born during this year, 1966, are considered ineluctably unlucky.