

## *From Heterotopias to Cultural Landscapes: On Reconstructing Buraku Leather Towns into 'Japanese National Spaces'*

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In this article I analyse the spatial marginalization of 'buraku areas' in Japan, and examine the town-making programmes implemented in some urban buraku districts. In contemporary Japan, people labelled as 'burakumin' (hamlet people) are commonly described as the descendants of Tokugawa-era outcasts of Japan, who were engaged in special occupations (leather industry, meat packing, street entertainment, drum making) and compelled to live in separate areas. Despite the heterogeneity of these populations, the definition of 'buraku origins' has remained fixed over time and is based on one's birth, former or current residence in a buraku and engagement in the buraku industries. I describe the case of Kinégawa and Naniwa leather towns in Tokyo and Osaka respectively; in particular, the urban revitalization activities organized by the Museum of Education and Leather Industry (Archives Kinégawa), and the 'Osaka Naniwa Human Rights Respect Town Making' project. The study draws on ethnographic material collected during visits to the neighbourhoods and leather factories and through my participation in community initiatives and exhibitions. The findings show that buraku minority networks transform 'heterotopic' categorizations in dominant and political discourses (isolation, marginalization, dirtiness and smell of the leather factory) and reconstruct leather towns by drawing upon both local and national conceptual spaces (e.g. the 'nation', 'cultural landscapes', the 'hometown', the leather industry, the 'city').

**Keywords:** buraku, heterotopia, minority, town-making, museum

### **Introduction**

The 'buraku' in Japan is a fluid social construct that encompasses a variety of individuals of different cultural and social backgrounds, subject to constant reconfigurations and transformation including industrialization, urbanization, migration, and inter-marriage. People labelled as 'burakumin' (hamlet people) are commonly described as the descendants of Tokugawa-era outcasts of Japan, who were engaged in special occupations (leather industry, meat packing, street entertainment, drum making) and compelled to live in separate areas. Despite the heterogeneity of these populations, the definition of 'buraku origin' has remained fixed over time and is based on one's birth, former or current residence in a buraku, and engagement in the buraku industries. After the abolition of the status system in 1871, and the implementation of the Law for Special Measures for Dōwa ('assimilation') Projects in 1969, the condition of burakumin ameliorated. However, these people still face discrimination in terms of access to education and housing, discriminatory messages circulating on the web, as well as background checks conducted by private agencies for employment and marriage. The image of 'buraku' continues to be associated with poverty, spatial separation, dirtiness, and ideas of social exclusion.

The discussion that follows lends support to recent research that examines how new minority identity politics and 'practices of multiculturalism' (Hankins 2012) question the

separation of ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ and renegotiates the role and power of minorities in society through a variety of initiatives (Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, Graburn et al. 2010). This perspective is important to challenge commonplace descriptions of the issue that are based on the historical relationship between former outcast groups and the current problem, but that do not consider recent changes and experiences relating to the buraku (Amos 2011, Hankins 2012). In particular, I argue that individuals and networks engaged with the issue (e.g., activists, performers, teachers, adults and children living in a buraku district and working in buraku occupations) re-organize popular descriptions (isolation, marginalization) and major factors of categorization (in particular the smell and dirtiness) on positive principles (local attachment) and interconnection with the ‘non-buraku’ (economic and social value of the industrial areas) (Wimmer 2008; Cangià 2012, 2013) through urban practices (community events, activities, and local exhibitions). Museums and community activities in this regard represent ‘strategic’ terrains that help build new meanings (Foucault 1986, De Certeau 1984) and challenge the association of buraku people with ‘its’ territory. I interpret ‘locality’ as the relational and social contexts in which actors cooperate and exercise their capacity to influence wider political forces and environment, by playing different roles, producing and re-shaping spatial boundaries and identity registers.

### **Theoretical Background**

In order to investigate the ‘buraku issue’, I relate to the notion of ‘heterotopia’, which was originally introduced to the social sciences by Michel Foucault (1986). Heterotopias (from the Greek ‘hetero’ which means ‘other’ and ‘topos’ which means ‘place’) were defined as ‘places in which all the other emplacements of a culture are at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed’, as those ‘places that are outside’ (Foucault 1998: 178); yet they are related to representing and inverting all other places. Foucault makes the example of the cemetery ‘as a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces that is however connected with all the sites of the city state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery’ (Foucault 1986: 25). The concept has provoked many interpretations and applications in the social sciences, and came to signify also new forms of representation of marginal spaces. Heterotopias were described as counter-hegemonic representations of, and forms of resistance to ‘the centre’ as ‘third spaces’ (Bhabha 1994) with new meanings associated with marginality (Shields 1991; Hetherington 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Davis 2010). They correspond to what Jerome Krase (2012) has called ‘ethnic theme

parks’;<sup>1</sup> in other words, stages for performances and spectacles produced by locals in order to represent their social and cultural reality in front of outsiders and tourists. Heterotopias, like ethnic theme parks, are more than mere representations of reality, and contribute to determining what the viewer should consider as ‘real’ of the locality (Krase 2012). They represent dynamic processes in which people engage to promote social change, by employing and transforming heterotopic symbols and characteristics that make spaces somewhat ambivalent into new boundaries and meanings (Lefebvre 1991, Hetherington 1997). The interpretations of these meanings can be multiple, different and at times contradictory among local inhabitants, ordinary people and institutions (Gotham 2005).

Here, I interpret the buraku as heterotopia in a double sense. On the one hand, I describe how the issue has been historically associated with ambivalent meanings (dirtiness, isolation, disorder, smell) in commonplace discourses. On the other hand, borrowing Hetherington’s definition of heterotopia, I describe buraku practices as ‘the sites in which all things displaced, marginal, rejected or ambivalent are engaged, and this engagement becomes the bases of an alternative mode of ordering’ (Hetherington 1996a: 159). I illustrate the interplay between the taking-on and re-positioning of categorizing principles through interconnection between social roles and experiences.<sup>2</sup> I examine these social fields of buraku activism not as mere counter-hegemonic spaces existing apart from the ‘non-buraku’, but as alternative modes of ordering and reconfiguring the issue by adopting, blurring and transforming the boundaries between the two dimensions. I discuss the strategic ways in which the buraku practices adopt the marker of difference, blur the boundaries with the ‘other’, and preserve features of both the buraku and the non-buraku to build new experiences. Heterotopias, in this sense, can be defined as the processes resulting from

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Ethnic theme parks’ are sites for ethnic emporia such as exotic food stores, restaurants, merchandise and souvenir shops (e.g. Little Italies, Chinatowns), and represent part of the urban consumption economy (Krase 2012).

<sup>2</sup> I use the expression ‘taking-on’ rather than ‘resisting’ to describe buraku practices, following Sara Ahmed’s (1999) interpretation of Franz Fanon’s argument concerning the ‘white gaze’ of the black body: taking on external categorizations in this sense means appropriating the external gaze and, in Fanon’s words, letting the ‘black body’ be ‘sealed into that crushing objecthood’ (Fanon 1986: 109). The transformation of external and common categorizations for the buraku occurs by first accepting and appropriating the symbols and characteristics of marginalization, rather than resisting them, and then repositioning these on new standards.

boundaries-blurring and re-positioning practices. To understand these processes, I draw on De Certeau's understanding of 'strategy' and 'tactics' simultaneously, and try to overcome the opposition between these two dimensions. On the one hand, buraku urban practices work as strategies, insofar as they 'assume a place that can be circumscribed as proper (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations' (De Certeau 1984: xviii). On the other hand, they act as 'tactics', by insinuating themselves into the other's place, 'without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance' (De Certeau 1984: xix). The practices that I illustrate in this article act between these two levels, both circumscribing their own place of operation (the buraku) and infiltrating and move in the symbolic dimension of the 'other' (the 'Japanese') to look for new spaces of representation. These spaces are a new form of management of difference by minority networks — which I call 're-positioning' — in addition to the four patterns that were identified by Joseph Doyle Hankins and that include *enlistment*, *equilibration*, *authenticity*, and *wounded-ness* (Hankins 2012).<sup>3</sup>

I focus on the urban initiatives in Kinegawa (Tokyo) and Naniwa (Osaka) leather towns, in particular the activities organized by the Museum of Education and Leather Industry (hereafter Archives Kinegawa) and the Osaka Naniwa Human Rights Respect Town Making' project. I conducted fieldwork research in these social fields between 2007 and 2009 and, during this time, regularly visited districts, museums and leather factories, participated in community activities and conducted informal interviews with activists, museum personnel, educators, experts, and community people. Here, I draw especially on the exhibitions and my visits to the neighbourhoods and leather factories.

Archives Kinegawa is an exhibition hall on the ground floor of the former Kinegawa Elementary School in Kinegawa district (Tokyo) that was built in 2004 after the closure of the school. Teachers involved in the organization of the museum are also engaged in activities in the surrounding districts, including educational and community initiatives in collaboration with the local branch of the Buraku Liberation League (hereafter BLL).<sup>4</sup> Most of these

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<sup>3</sup> 'Enlistment' refers to the identification and placement of minorities alongside each other in a list as evidence in the struggle against homogeneity; 'equilibration' entails an assumption that all minority groups need to be rendered equivalent under a rubric of human rights; 'authenticity' demands for a culture to display as a proof of the existence of minority groups; finally, 'wounded-ness' is the description of these groups as victims of social harm and violations of human rights (Hankins 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The Buraku Liberation League (BLL, Buraku kaihō dōmei) is the main buraku political movement and was founded in 1922 under the name Zenkoku Suiheisha (National Levelers Association).

initiatives concern the re-definition of the spatial image of the district and the surroundings with new meanings relating to the locality, the production of leather, and its importance within the wider context of the nation.

The ‘Osaka Naniwa Human Rights Respect Town Making’ project, in turn, was initiated in 2002 in Naniwa district (Osaka) by the BLL with the support of national, municipal, and local administrations. The project includes the Museum of Human Rights *Liberty Osaka* and the ‘Road of Human Rights and Taiko (drums)’, and aims at shedding a new light on the *taiko* drum industry in the district and transforming Naniwa leather town into the ‘hometown of the drums’ (*taiko no furusato*).

In the next section, I outline the history of the buraku districts as heterotopic spaces, their marginalization, identification and current condition. In the second section, I describe programmes and language of cultural nationalism in Japan as the institutional and ideological framework for buraku activism. Ultimately, I introduce the two leather towns, museums and other activities and their engagement in local development programmes.

### **The Buraku as a Heterotopia and Its Transformations in the Urban Context**

The spatial boundaries of the buraku areas have long been subject to constant transformations and reconfigurations. In medieval Japan (1185-1600), the areas in which outcasts were allowed to live were geographically mapped. These groups were called ‘base people’ (*senmin*), lived in tax-free areas and engaged in occupations such as care-taking of tombs, collecting food for the hunting falcons of the nobility, funeral services, strings making, leather tanning and working, butchering, drum making, footgear and shoes manufacturing, and *tatami* floor mat making. Other professions were artistic, religious and shamanistic practices undertaken during funerals and rituals. The ambiguity associated with these people referred also to their residency in peripheral and marginal locations. While some special status people did not have permanent residence, others resided in settlements in undesirable areas such as river-banks, under bridges and near slopes. All these different categories of Medieval *senmin* fell under the outcast groups during the Feudal time (1603 onwards) including the *eta* (literally, much filth) and *hinin* (literally, non-human). The *eta* included people engaged with occupations such as caretaking of tombs, funeral services, leather tanning and working, butchering, drum and shoe making. The term *kawaramono* (people of the river banks) referred to those people living in riverbed districts and dealing with occupations such as gravediggers, road cleaners, comb makers and ritual puppeteers (Law 1997: 70). A number of

other categories of people were included in other non-resident groups, such as the *hinin* (non human) that were mainly criminals, prostitutes, diviners, people who took care of prisoners, artists, and wandering monks (De Vos & Wagatsuma 1966; Koyama 1990). *Sanjo* (scattered places) and *honjo* (central/real place) were the terms used to refer to the districts inhabited by these people during medieval times (Ohnuki-Tierney 1987). Most of the *sanjo* districts originated as special compounds for ritual performers attached to major ceremonial centers, as well as for lepers, animal skinners, and leather workers resided in these areas (Law 1997: 73). A great variety of characters were used to write the term, including scattered place, place of divination, birthing place, mountaintop and third district (Law 1997). This variety, according to Law, ‘tells us something not only about the range of meanings that these places had but also about the confusion and even the hysteria that signifying the unsignifiable has generated in Japanese society over time’ (Law 1997: 72).

With the Meiji Restoration (in 1871) and the Emancipation Edict (*Eta kaihō-rei*), the *eta* and *hinin* groups were renamed *shin-heimin* (new commoners) and were granted the freedom to move and participate in all social activities. However, while these ‘new commoners’ had the legal right to move without restraint, they lost their monopoly on traditional occupations as a source of economic livelihood. Representations of buraku people from the Meiji period onward started to describe these people as the underclass of previous times and the residents of the previous outcast areas (Uesugi et al. 1992). These people and other disadvantaged groups and individuals were all lumped together into the modern category of buraku, the descendants of previous outcast groups, and kept being associated with ideas of poverty, and certain occupational practices and spaces.

From the end of the Meiji period through to the post-WWII period, governmental policies for assimilation and new political actors emerged. The Burakumin were officially defined as people who ‘live together in particular districts and form separate communities’ (De Vos & Wagatsuma 1966: 44). Another way to identify buraku areas and people was known as the *koseki* system (Family Register), established in 1872: addresses, births and deaths in the family, and social status (in the old *koseki*) of all heads of family were recorded and enlisted and held open as public record. The buraku lists include a series of directories containing information on buraku community locations, number of households, major occupations etc. throughout the country. For instance, the symbol (...) near the address means that the area concerned is considered to be a buraku district; the numeral 4 inside a circle, or a circled letter D (for Dōwa), stand for ‘being a Burakumin’ (Gottlieb 2006: 55). In 1968, the

lists ceased to be freely available for public perusal. However, cases of discriminatory practices through illegal consultation of these lists continued, in particular with private companies and detective agencies to inquire into the background of job applicants in recruitment, individuals in case of marriage or areas in case of real estate.

Since the late 1960s, the identification of buraku areas by the government was characterized by the official denomination as *Dōwa chiku* (literally, assimilation area) that served to identify the areas for implementation of affirmative actions and the 1969 Special Measures Law, aimed at improving the infrastructures and economies of buraku areas. These policies lasted until 2007. Nowadays, many cases of discriminatory attacks continue online and include messages about buraku areas and people, as well as the use of internet maps and search engines to obtain and share personal information on names and housing location of members from these communities.

Despite the heterogeneity of the discourses and approaches towards the issue throughout history, categorization of the buraku districts still remained linked to ideas of dirtiness, separation and habitants' engagement in unskilled occupations. These same factors are taken and transformed by buraku networks, associations and individuals through the implementation of urban development programmes and local activities. These initiatives aim at re-constructing the 'buraku' as the 'hometown', thereby re-formulating the idea of the 'buraku' through readable and commonplace signs. They do so by drawing upon positive principles that relate both to the locality, local attachment, community-based relationships on the one hand, and 'national' social, cultural and economic values (e.g. traditional industries, 'national cultural landscapes') on the other.

The shift of interest in the urban community dimension that occurred in the 1990s in Japan became the framework for these spaces of representation. In particular, the national community measures adopted in the 1960s by the Liberal Democratic Party (e.g., *machi* and *furusato zukuri*, 'town and hometown making' programmes), 'human rights enlightenment activities' (Mutafchieva 2009; Amos 2011), as well as the projects sponsored by the *Agency for Cultural Affairs* (hereafter ACA), represent the institutional framework in which I understand these practices.

### **Cultural Landscapes and Hometown Making Programmes**

*Machi zukuri* (literally town-making) programmes were initially conceived as an ideological counterpart to the city planning programmes back in the 1960s, and were intended as a social

contribution to the making of municipalities. The programme represented a community-based and ideological trend slowly integrated into the state's city planning institution with limited direct input by local people. In the mid-1990s, however, shortly after the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the government recognized the role played by the local and regional Non-Profit (NPO) and volunteer organizations to cope with the crisis and the reconstruction of towns. On this occasion, the social aspects of community development, the local dimension and the involvement of peoples began to be taken into consideration as a set of priorities. As a result, *machi zukuri* programmes began to receive special attention, in particular between 2002 and 2007 (Mutafchieva 2009). At the same time, the BLL began to use these programmes as the political and institutional framework for reconstructing buraku areas.

Another important framework is the ACA's programmes for the promotion of cultural landscapes (*bunkateki keikan*), and the preservation of the Japanese key industries. In this context, government organizations, NPOs and NGOs were supported to help local people 'learn the significance of discovering the value in the scenic landscapes with which they are familiar in their daily lives' and experience the 'quintessence of the cultural landscapes', rooted in the traditional industries and mode of life of local hometowns (*furusato*). According to the ACA, 'cultural landscapes, being close to the hearts of people who were born, grew up and live in the locality, symbolize the image of the hometown (*furusato*) (...) In order to maintain and protect 'cultural landscapes' in an appropriate manner, it is necessary, building upon the inherited mechanism of traditional industries and modes of life (...)'.<sup>5</sup>

*Furusato* — usually translated as hometown — is an important notion employed in national policies and programmes, in particular in local and touristic advertising campaigns where local cultures were promoted. *Furusato zukuri* (the evocation of *furusato* through home/native-place making) is the making of some native aesthetics as temporally stable in the social imaginary (Robertson 1988), and is strongly linked with the preservation of cultural landscapes and traditional industries. Since the 1980s, images of *furusato* were also promoted in urban settings: for instance, the nostalgia for a lost Japan was created through images of romanticized rural landscapes in Tokyo's urban environment, through the so called 'Furusato Tokyo campaign', in which revival of crafts and culinary traditions were distributed (Creighton 2009).

I argue that these conceptual frames were reformulated at the local level by the social

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<sup>5</sup> From the Report of the Study on the Protection of Cultural Landscapes Associated with Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.



practices introduced in this article. These work as interesting interpretations of minority roles within the national context, by looking at the place of marginality within the urban and national environment. In the next sections, I describe these practices, with a special focus on exhibitions, adult's and children's narratives concerning the locality, and the major elements employed in these urban reconstruction programmes.

### **Kinegawa Leather Town**

Kinegawa (today known as Higashi Sumida) is an important pig leather, oil, and soap producing industrial area in the east of Sumida Ward (Tokyo). The area became a buraku district at the end of the nineteenth century when the city implemented urbanization policies that led to leather factories and workers being relocated from the old buraku district (Asakusa) to the suburban areas of Arakawa and Higashi Sumida. The immigration of newcomers, intermarriages, and the emigration of buraku residents further modified the demographic composition of the district throughout the twentieth century. Currently, people living, working or commuting to Higashi Sumida include Koreans, Chinese, South and Southeast Asians (Filipinos, Thais, Malaysians, Bangladeshis), Africans, and Japanese.

Kinegawa community-based programmes include the *Sumida Kodomokai* children's organization,<sup>6</sup> school activities, exhibitions, visits to the surrounding leather factories, and community events. The source of Kinegawa community activism is represented by the past experiences and memories of the former Kinegawa Elementary School, which was opened in the district in 1936 and has been operating as a Dōwa education institute since 2003. The school was closed as a result of increasing discriminatory attacks against the 'children of Kinegawa' by children living in the surrounding areas. In 2004, teachers and part of the community decided to establish the Archives Kinegawa Museum in the former school's building in order to maintain the memory of the school and valorise the district. The exhibition includes the history and educational experiences of Kinegawa and portrayals of the everyday life in the district, including the display of leather tanning machinery, artefacts,

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<sup>6</sup> Sumida Kodomokai is one of the children organizations (i.e., part of the Kaihō Kodomokai, 'Children's Liberation Society') established by the BLL throughout the country to involve communities in addressing buraku and other forms of discrimination. Children aged between 3 and 13 and their families gather on Saturdays in the BLL's building located in a nearby district, and meet with teachers and BLL supporters to cook, draw, play, craft objects, visit factories, and discuss various topics (for example, daily life, discrimination).

pictures (of workers in factories and children crafting leather objects) and children's diaries.

People in the community are aware of the various factors that negatively define the town; for example, a local informant remarked, 'the place in which I live is called Kinogawa and is full of leather and oil factories. Everyone says that it smells bad, that Kinogawa has a weird smell'. However, the initiatives and exhibitions organized by the museum pay special attention on certain factors commonly associated with the heterotopic character of the buraku, and invert these into positive aspects relating to the nation or the city, thereby reducing the idea of separation between the buraku and the non-buraku. In addition, a special emphasis is put on those elements that reinforce a sense of local attachment and interconnection. In particular, the interplay between different individuals, identities, and experiences crossing local boundaries of the district on a daily basis, leads to a special engagement in and attachment to the locality of the town that, in a 'bifocal' perspective (Durham Peters 1997), is not seen as separate from wider social relationships. Social actors simultaneously experience the attachment to the local as both the cause and effect of wider relations with the 'national' (for example, with an emphasis on the connection with the everyday life in Tokyo, Japanese industries). Multiple fields of exchange in which the participation of people might be extended are hence organized. These include, for instance, ethnic cultural events like food corners and fashion shows, leather industry events, visits to leather factories organized in collaboration with schools from the whole city and companies within the context of *Dōwa* education.<sup>7</sup> The participation of people and individuals living in the surroundings of Kinogawa represents an important consequence of this process.

Archives Kinogawa museum includes three main thematic areas strengthening this local attachment: the history of the town (diaries, pictures); leather tanning, manufacturing techniques, and industrial materials (leather made objects, machinery, pictures); the educational project (hand-made items, drawings, pictures). Narratives in Archives Kinogawa (poems and labels) emphasize aspects of the hometown (*furusato*) by employing geographical properties of the area, historical accounts (Kinogawa before and after World War II) and local experiences (leather factories in Kinogawa and the relationship with their surroundings).

The museum plays a *heterotopic* role in Hetherington's sense by engaging all 'things

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<sup>7</sup> *Dōwa* education was initiated by the government and the BLL to tackle buraku and other forms of discrimination and include programs in schools, programs for buraku adults, and programs for non-buraku to learn about the issue, often organized in workplaces such as companies.

displaced, marginal, rejected or ambivalent' and proposing 'an alternative mode of ordering', through a rigorous selection of objects and narratives, as well as through the translation the buraku into readable conceptual spaces (e.g. local attachment, industries, objects of everyday life). Maps marking the number of leather factories and old pictures of the district are displayed. As a matter of fact, the increase in the number of factories as a sign of local improvement, and their size and the modernization of the leather production are described as positive aspects and representation of the wider context of Japanese industries: the replacement of urban and environmental negative aspects (the smell, the dirtiness, the narrow street and grey colours) with positive ones is illustrated by the presence of objects, poems and parts of children's diaries. These exhibitions display the community and its people's pride in their social relationships, the work of parents in leather tanning, family relationships, and the attachment to the locality.

Another part of the exhibition, and of the whole district project, includes children's experiences in the life of the community. The children's imagery of the local environment is one of the priority interests of buraku education and neighbourhood activism intended to strengthen self-esteem and social relationships. During school time, children write diary notebooks (*seikatsu noto*) about their daily life. Some diaries written between 1964 and 2003 have been compiled into the collection called 'Children of Kinogawa' and displayed in the last section of the museum as historical documentation. Children are asked to write about their daily life in the district to identify, to describe and reflect on aspects they consider important, to think about the local environment, as well as to give testimonies of personal experiences. These writing practices help foster the relationship with their hometown and the community. In some diaries, children reformulated the image of the district by exchanging dominant features like touristic spots (Tokyo tower, Ginza district) to create a parallel between the hometown and the rest of the city. Other essays contain descriptions of factories and explicit concerns about discrimination. Children demonstrated awareness of the district's problems and the need to intervene in their environment, by highlighting negative attributes (the smell) through personal feelings exemplified by remarks such as, 'I used to wake up to the sound of cars and the smell of the oil and I did like it'; alternatively, they replaced the negative aspects with other positive images, saying 'the oil can be used for making food, soap, instant noodles, bread, margarine, cookies and perfumes' (Cangià 2012).

In general, during my staying in the community, I have observed a common identification of the district as 'not different from the rest of the city', as a 'big industry' with

‘old techniques of production that are preserved for future generations’; a special emphasis is thus put on the connections with the ‘outside’ and on the economic value and the historical relevance of the industrial area. On a few occasions, the tradition of leather tanning in Kinogawa was expressly described in term of ‘roots’ and ‘Japanese culture’.

Urban, educational initiatives and the exhibition language in Kinogawa appropriate commonplace spatial features associated with the ‘buraku’ and re-frame these within a wider dimension that expands to national boundaries. Although at first localized in the *here-and-now* of the district, these practices transcend specificity and local borders, by employing an *assimilating* strategy (Karp 1990), a strategy that highlights similarity (based on social, economic and cultural principles) rather than difference. However, they pride the community on the industry in the town and its history by crossing local ethnic and social boundaries, and tell about experiences of a vanishing locality of the area (with memories of Kinogawa in the past) by reconstructing community relationships in its present.

### **Naniwa Leather Town**

Naniwa ward (formerly Watanabe village) is an important industrial area and leather trade centre in Osaka engaged in the tanning and secondary leather-work, in particular *taiko* drum manufacturing. Historical outcast groups were gradually moved to the limits of the city and relocated in Naniwa. The district has been at the centre of activism by the BLL since the late 1960s, and is home to the Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute. Currently, Naniwa is an officially designated ‘assimilation area’, where a variety of individuals live, especially buraku people and Korean communities.

The ‘Osaka Naniwa Human Rights Respect Town Making’ is a project of community development implemented in the area in 2002 by a committee including the Osaka Municipal Government, Japan Rail East, the Osaka Taiko Industrial Association, the Naniwa branch of the BLL and various experts. The area, composed of thematic zones on human rights culture and taiko tradition, runs from the Ashiharabashi railway station to Liberty Osaka museum, including information boards and exhibitions. The programme aims at turning Naniwa into the ‘hometown of drums’ (*taiko no furusato*) through a twofold strategy, which includes two main projects: the Museum of Human Rights *Liberty Osaka*, and the *Road of Human Rights and Taiko*. The participation of the community, as well as other individuals from other areas of the city and tourists, is particularly strengthened in this context through a variety of initiatives, including cultural programmes, posters, promotional brochures, seminars,

workshops, festivals (*matsuri*) and concerts (Asaji 1997, Cangià 2009, Amos 2011).

*Liberty Osaka* (formerly the Osaka Human Rights History Museum) was built in 1985 and was renovated in 1995. Divided into four main units ('Human Rights Today', 'Our Values and Discrimination', 'The Activism of People who are Discriminated Against', 'Human Rights and You'), its main objective is to introduce the history and conditions of minorities, indigenous and other vulnerable groups in Japan (i.e. the burakumin, the Ainu of Hokkaidō, the Ryukyans of Okinawa, Korean and Chinese communities, women, homosexuals and the survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). The corner on the 'buraku issue' is divided into two parts. The first space, called 'the leatherwork', is composed of pictures and testimonies of leather-workers, leather-working tools and uniforms, as well as artefacts such as taiko drums and leather sheets. The second space, 'Community Reform and the Buraku Liberation Movement', describes the struggle against discrimination undertaken during social movements through the display of pictures, flags, former posters and other historical materials.

As a result of visits to the museum and conversations with the personnel, I identified common aspects that are employed to represent Naniwa leather town: these include economic standards (national production of leather), history (Naniwa industry in the context of national history) and cultural principles (cultural property, Japanese culture). At the same time, the museum looks for representative aspects that help develop pride in the locality and buraku culture such as the importance of the taiko drums in the national culture. It also exhibits instruments and uniforms of leather tanning, taiko drums, techniques of leather-tanning, and the life stories of tanners. A special emphasis of the exhibition is put on the historical transformation of the area into the 'biggest leather centre in Japan' and the consequent trade developed with the rest of the country. Watanabe village is described as 'the heart of leather production and distribution'.

The history of Naniwa is framed under the rubric of Japan's minority and human rights issues. Thus, the interpretation of the buraku issue crosses the borders of locality and uses the local context of Naniwa as one of the geographical starting points for a broader focus on human rights issues in Japan (Amos 2011, Hankins 2012). Interestingly, the components that are part of the town-making programme are not merely contained in the museum and exhibition itself, but ideas over human rights and history are supported by the surrounding environment (Amos 2011).

In this regard, the 'Road of Human Rights and Taiko' is an important project initiated

in 2002 by a committee including the Osaka Municipal Government, Japan Rail East, the Osaka Taiko Industrial Association, the BLL Naniwa branch, and various experts. The road's construction was intended to bring tourism to the area and to reclaim the history of drum-making in the district (Cangià 2009, Bender 2012). The impetus for the project was the success of a local band of drummers, called *Ikari* (literally anger) formed over a decade earlier by a group of youngsters interested in reviving the traditions of the taiko in the area. The Road is composed of ten zones, from 'Taiko makers' to 'human rights culture' zone, and runs nearly 500 meters towards the Osaka Human Rights Museum (*Liberty Osaka*). The Road includes taiko-shaped benches, telephone boxes, display of drum music pieces, statues, and information boards all of which concern the history of the district, the production and typologies of taiko drums. In the area nearby Liberty Osaka museum, several bronze statues of drummers are located and explain the production of drums. Some statues represent Japanese traditional drums, while others represent Okinawan native drummers and Korean percussions. According to Bender (2012), the statues function to include these other minorities as part of the multi-ethnic tapestry of modern Osaka. As a matter of fact, the museum represents the conditions of different minorities and develops a multi-ethnic nuance and a kind of cultural authenticity (Hankins 2012) in its exhibitions.

One of the major aspects of the Naniwa project are the taiko stores (*taiko-ya*), the factories in which the drums are produced, often mentioned and represented in the museum scripts and in the Road. The taiko stores are described as the 'places where traditional techniques of taiko production survive', a tradition that is 'shared with the community people and the rest of the country', and the means to change people's perception and understanding of the practice.

Naniwa town-making *strategically* retains some typical museum features, such as the search for more authentic forms of representations and the creation of a discursive logic, by 'equilibrating' (Hankins 2012) various minorities within the broader contexts of human rights. Moreover, it looks for representative objects to define the buraku culture; thus it makes use of stereotypical visual and material images to highlight self-awareness, sense of pride and related struggle undertaken by buraku people over their history. While a discourse on 'human rights culture' (Amos 2011: 179)<sup>8</sup> links the issue with other groups, a special emphasis is especially put on the 'buraku culture' (*buraku no bunka*) through identification of

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<sup>8</sup> The expression, 'Human Rights Culture' is popularized in the Plan of Action document authored for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (see Amos 2011: 149).

certain practices as the ‘authentic’ (Hankins 2012) culture of the buraku. This is different from Kinogawa, in which a more inclusive identity is registered that includes different backgrounds. Here a demarcation line is made between buraku groups and other minorities when it comes to the leather production (as the culture of the buraku), whereas links and cooperation with other minorities are emphasized when it comes to the ‘human rights culture’.

However, like Kinogawa town-making programme, the project in Naniwa challenges the idea of separateness from the Nation by simultaneously highlighting local aspects and features of the area, while recognizing the contact with the rest of the city and the nation by a special emphasis on trade activities (Naniwa as a leather trade centre) and the urban everyday life in the district (the Road).

### **On Reconstructing Buraku Leather Towns into ‘National Spaces’**

Like both De Certeau’s ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics’, the practices illustrated in this article operate through a twofold approach: on the one hand, they limit their place of operation within the spatial boundaries of the ‘buraku’ (industrial area, factories, taiko stores) and celebrate the community on these very aspects; on the other, they try to search within the conceptual spaces of the ‘other’ (the Japanese) for new forms of identity representations and meanings (the ‘nation’, ‘national culture’, socio-economic values, the ‘city’) where identities merge. The result are spaces that connect with pre-existing shared and accepted images of the ‘Japanese’, as well as those of disconnection, insofar as the buraku areas maintain characteristics of discrimination to challenge social relations and commonplace categorizations. ‘Authentic’ cultural forms become the basis for more complex manoeuvres of multiculturalism in which heterotopic modes of re-positioning and boundary-blurring challenge the idea of separate-ness between the Japanese and minority groups.

The urban programmes in the two leather towns make use of native aesthetics of the past, local attachment and social and economic values of the industrial areas within the wider context of the ‘city’ and the ‘nation’. This is done without opposing the two, and combining elements of the local imaginary of the past with the present effects of urbanization and industrialization. In Naniwa, for instance, taiko shapes are integrated in the urban life of the district through bus stops and traffic signals. In Kinogawa, the factories are presented as a source of economic roles producing things for everyday modern life via old techniques and hard work. Consequently, the view of the ‘marginal’ and the ‘central’, the buraku and the

non-buraku, as well as other migrant identities and personal experiences, as homogeneous social spaces is challenged and re-defined in view of more complex identity factors.

In this context, the reconstruction of urban spaces occurs through the employment of 'marginal' features and their integration into the environment. This integration is not a mere process of inclusion but a form of re-ordering of the buraku and of all their associated images and social relations. As a result, ethnic identities are not seen as discontinuous, separated and rooted in different dimensions. Buraku people, migrants, Japanese, individual and collective stories and experiences are extended and cross borders thereby inhabiting new landscapes in which these dimensions meet and intertwine. Challenging the fragmented landscape of these dimensions contributes to our understanding of the connection between social change and difference (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).



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