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Drumming out resistance in Japan: writing back Burakumin identity through music

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“Burakumin maggots... kill eta filth... burakumin have four legs... buraku people cause AIDS...”

Recent graffiti recorded by [Alasdair McLaughlan](#) is a powerful reminder of the resilience of anti-Burakumin discrimination in 21st century Japan.

Yet, who are the Burakumin? Most people in Japan will know little, if anything, about this social minority, despite them [numbering between 1 and 3 million](#) people. Burakumin are largely ignored today, partly due to governmental policies that can be traced to the Meiji period (1868-1912). These policies focused on the assimilation of ethnic and social minorities to facilitate the creation of a mono-ethnic and mono-cultural national Japanese identity.



Ikari drumming group (source: taikofestival.org.uk)

Human rights, minority rights and cultural approaches have failed in emancipating the Burakumin in Japanese society. However, an innovative taiko drumming group named Ikari has succeeded. Ikari specifically identify themselves as Burakumin taiko players – something previously unheard of. This allows the Burakumin to be written back into a narrative that historically silenced them.

The Burakumin minority: an ambivalent emancipation

The Burakumin are descendants of the Eta (“extreme filth”) and Hinin (“non-human”) castes from feudal Edo Japan, a period which dated from 1603 to 1868. These castes, akin to the ‘untouchable’ Dalit castes in India, were abolished by the [Eta Emancipation Edict 1871](#) in order to assimilate them into mainstream society. This was reinforced by post-1968 policies in modern Japan specifically targeting the Burakumin. These policies have enabled many Burakumin to be lifted out of abject poverty. Yet, they have failed to achieve substantive political emancipation for the Burakumin. The Burakumin have not been granted legal minority status or the associated benefits and have not been able to maintain their diverse craftsmanship traditions, which have been around for 300 years.

As a result, the Burakumin have experienced an ambivalent emancipation. Their socio-economic conditions have improved, but they are still discriminated against in areas such as education, employment and marriage.

This account demonstrates the peculiar predicament of the Burakumin: how do you write yourself into a narrative that doesn’t know you exist?

Activism on behalf of the Burakumin has not been insignificant, and today, the Buraku Liberation League has become Japan’s [most powerful human rights movement](#). Yet, none have taken Ikari’s approach.

Ikari: A fresh perspective to ‘minority’ rights discourse

The Ikari drumming group [was established in 1987](#), in the Naniwa area of Osaka – a Burakumin region. Although most taiko drum craftsmen in Japan were Burakumin from Naniwa, no taiko group in the whole of Japan identified themselves as Burakumin. This is where the significance of Ikari lies. In taiko history, there is a conscious disassociation of the production of the taiko, where handling of leather is considered ‘spiritually impure’, from the performance, which is often associated with ‘purifying’ religious rituals. Ikari’s performances exposed this broken history.

Ikari’s use of music and performance is not supposed to be an ‘authentic’ cultural practice. Rather, Ikari mimic the Japanese taiko in order to politicise it. When playing, they draw the audience’s attention to anti-Burakumin discrimination, which was previously ignored. In this way, a non-Burakumin, Japanese instrument is re-appropriated, transformed and shared with the public. Concepts such as identity, nation and culture can be locally re-written to empower both the Burakumin community and the non-Burakumin Japanese.

Minorities in Japan are often presented as passive victims of discrimination. Ikari, however, provides an alternative means of identification for the Burakumin as an active participant in his or her own story. Through performances that speak to the hearts and minds of the audience, the Burakumin acquire agency to change his or her own status rather than having to wait for the government or Burakumin activists to bring about that change. The non-Burakumin audience also become active participants in the community by being forced to question their own position in society.

The history of the taiko, contextualised through Ikari's performance, acquires new and unexpected meanings. Ikari demonstrates that cultural practices can secure effective political representation where other more mainstream approaches, such as human rights campaigning, may fail. Although this story cannot be generalised, its bottom-up perspective provides an alternative and innovative account of being a minority in Japan.

With special thanks to The School of Oriental and African Studies for the screening of '[Angry Drummers](#)' and Q&A with the director, Professor Terada, for providing the motivation for this blog post. A fully referenced version of this post is available on request.

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