The Return of the Outcast(e) Map: Kobe, Cartography and the Problem of Discrimination in Modern Japan

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In November 1968, the Mitsukoshi Department Store in Kobe found itself at the center of a major controversy. At the beginning of the month, it had joined with Mitsukoshi stores in Osaka and Tokyo in exhibiting and offering for sale reproductions of a selection of historical maps as part of a special event to mark the centenary of the Meiji Restoration. The idea was to give interested members of the public a chance to imagine, through the maps, what different areas of the country had been like at the time of the Restoration—at that moment, in other words, when Japan as a whole stood at the threshold of modernity.

Of the one hundred or so historical maps made available for purchase during the special two-week event, two, in particular, were to become the focus of criticism and protest. The maps in question, which formed a complementary set, depicted the area around Kobe in the immediate wake of the Restoration, and were, no doubt, featured prominently when the exhibit first opened at the local Mitsukoshi branch.

Looking at them now, some 50 years later, it is not difficult to understand how it was that the maps came to be included in the special sale. The “treaty port” at Kobe had, after all, been “opened” for foreign residence and trade just as the events of the Restoration were unfolding in 1868, and the two maps, originally printed on wood blocks in five attractive colors, capture much of interest about that moment. This is particularly true of the first map (Map 1 (1)), which depicts the area between the Minato and Ikuta rivers, where the new “foreign concession” (kyoryūchi) was established.

To the right hand side of the map we see the foreign concession ringed by the consulates of the various treaty powers, while at the left hand side, in a large red box, stands the Hyōgo Prefectural Court (Hyōgo-ken saibansho)—the seat of Japanese governmental authority in the surrounding area. In between these two centers of power we see the busy harbor, thronging with an array of Western and Japanese ships, the streets of the main Japanese town and, in the background, the famous peaks of the Rokkō mountain range. On closer inspection we also begin to notice other things: The Ikuta Shrine, for example, linked to...
the foreign concession by a road lined with blossoming cherries, as well as various facilities established to serve the newly arrived population of white men including, most prominently, the Fukuharachō brothel district and a special Christian cemetery. The second of the two controversial maps (not shown here) depicted the area to the West of the Minato river—the other side, in other words, of the Hyōgo Prefectural Court—and although there is less evidence of the new foreign presence, it too is of considerable interest for what it reveals about the state of the old port town of Hyōgo at the dawn of the Meiji era.

What made the two maps controversial in 1968, however, was that in addition to identifying the “ordinary” peasant communities in the area surrounding the treaty port, each of them also showed the location of a community of Tokugawa period outcasts marked with the words “eta mura” (= eta village)—a label which, in terms of its emotive power and historical resonances, might well be compared to the words “nigger town” in English.

When this became known to representatives of local community organizations, including the Kobe branch of the Buraku Liberation League (BLL), a national group formed to fight discrimination against those believed to be descendants of Tokugawa period outcasts, they quickly moved to protest the Mitsukoshi decision to display and sell these “discriminatory old maps” (sabetsu no kochizu), describing it as “utterly lacking in common sense” (amari ni mo hijōshi sugiru). “The sale of such maps,” the BLL bluntly stated, “contributes to the spread of discrimination.”

For local activists and community representatives, the timing of the Mitsukoshi event undoubtedly contributed to a general sense of anger and frustration. As newspaper reports at the time of the controversy hastened to remind readers, it had been just a few short years after the Restoration, in 1871, that the new Meiji government issued its so-called “emancipation decree” (kaihōrei) for Tokugawa period outcasts, formally granting them the same legal status as members of the commoner population, and ending official use of the old derogatory names. Needless to say, much had happened in the ensuing century, including, most famously, the establishment in 1922 of the Zenkoku Suiheisha, or National Levellers’ Society, organized by members of former outcaste communities from around the country to fight for dignity, self-respect, and basic rights. By that time these communities were widely referred to as tokushu buraku, or “special villages”, itself a term with pejorative connotations, which was later replaced by a range of other designations such as “villages awaiting emancipation” (mikaihō buraku), “villages subject to discrimination” (hisabetsu buraku), or in abbreviated form simply as buraku (= villages), with the rest implied.

Whatever they were called, however, the reality was that even in the 1960s, life in these communities was still characterized by segregation, deprivation and poverty. For all the shifts in official nomenclature, moreover, the old Tokugawa period word, eta, which literally means “much filth”, continued to be used in everyday speech and social interactions as an insult and provocation. From the point of view of the BLL and its allies, then, the Mitsukoshi decision to display and sell maps describing local communities with this word, as part of a commemoration of the same historical moment in which they had first been promised “emancipation”, constituted clear evidence of the ongoing insensitivity and, indeed, cluelessness of the company. Although it was never publicly mentioned in 1968, the sense of frustration may have been further compounded by the fact that it was precisely the community identified in the first map of Kobe, which was said to have inspired a Tosa samurai named Ōe Taku (1847-1921) to lodge the petition that, for much of the 20th century, was credited with having led the Meiji government to issue the
1871 “emancipation edict” in the first place.8 This understanding has now been thoroughly debunked. For many at the time, however, this was the place from which the state’s promise of emancipation had first issued, and yet one hundred years later it was still being represented with the same hateful language.

In terms of timing, it surely also mattered that the late 1960s in Japan, as in so many parts of the world, were a period of growing concern with social justice issues. Buraku activists, in particular, had good reason to feel that they finally stood on the threshold of significant change. In 1965, a special advisory council (Dōwa taisaku shingikai) established by the government at the beginning of the decade, had issued a landmark report declaring the discrimination faced by Japan’s Buraku residents to be a “national problem” (kokumin-teki na kadai), the eradication of which was a “state responsibility” (kuni no sekimu de aru). This had opened the way to a period of cooperation between the national government and groups such as the BLL, which eventually culminated in the 1969 “Law on Special Measures for Dōwa [= harmonization] Projects.” In the decades that followed, this law was to significantly reshape the “Buraku issue” and its place in Japanese society by ensuring that large amounts of government funding were channeled into projects earmarked for the improvement of basic living conditions in communities around the country, which were now officially described using yet another name—“harmonization districts” (dōwa chiku).9

At the end of 1968, then, as details of this major new legislation were being finalised, a great deal of attention had come to focus on the Buraku problem. The issue was taken up in a high profile television documentary shown on the national broadcaster, NHK, in December of that year, and newspaper articles drew comparisons to the “black power” movement and the struggle for civil rights in the United States at the time.10 From late in 1967, moreover, the BLL had led a campaign to protest the way that another kind of historical source material, family records compiled in the early Meiji period (the so-called jinshin koseki), were being used to perpetuate discrimination. In response, in early 1968 the government had moved to prevent members of the public from accessing all such family records, and indeed, they remain off-limits to this day.11 Against this background, it is little wonder that Buraku groups felt empowered to speak out about the way in which their communities were being represented in historical maps. Nor is it surprising that Mitsukoshi, for its part, was quick to try and resolve the situation. On the one hand, the store management sought to explain its decision by stating that the maps “had been left in the form [in which they had originally been published in the 1860s] so as to ensure that the [reproductions] would be useful as historical and scholarly research material.”12 On the other hand, however, they were also quick to announce that the decision to put the maps on sale, “was a major error, which showed disregard for human rights.” In addition to putting an immediate stop to the sale, the store promised to “make efforts to promptly buy back [all copies of] the ‘discriminatory old maps’ that we have sold.” As if to underline the general criticism made by the BLL, the deputy store manager was also quoted as saying, “We did a general check of the maps before putting them on sale, but had not noticed the problematic term (mondai no hyōgen) [i.e. the word eta]. Although it was done unwittingly, it is truly regrettable that our actions have served to further aggravate [the problem of] discrimination.”

With this the initial controversy was put to rest, but the Kobe Mitsukoshi incident was to have repercussions that continued to be felt for decades. In its wake, and that of a number of similar incidents that followed, publishers, museums and other organizations in Japan were to become increasingly cautious in their
handling of historical maps. It soon became common practice to erase language that might be used to identify outcaste communities when republishing or exhibiting historical maps and institutions of all kinds also began to limit open public access to original maps that contained such information. The concern behind this general shift, it should be emphasized, was not just with the use of derogatory or offensive terms, but also the possibility that old maps might be used to “out” the residents of particular neighborhoods as the descendants of outcastes, thereby re-inscribing old patterns of discrimination and exclusion with regard to employment, marriage, housing and so on. Japan’s Burakumin, after all, much like Dalits in India, are physically indistinguishable from the majority population, so local knowledge and consciousness of where “they” live has long been seen to form a significant part of the problem. Maps, it was feared, might serve to perpetuate discrimination by keeping such consciousness alive or, even worse, helping to rekindle it. For many, the seriousness of such concerns was underlined in the mid-1970s, when it was revealed that an unscrupulous private detective had compiled a list of Buraku districts around the country and offered it for sale to companies, so they could use it to investigate the backgrounds of potential employees and ensure that residents of these districts were not hired. Needless to say, apprehension about this and other forms of discrimination has not disappeared and, indeed, the advent of online services, such as Google Earth, has recently served to fuel a new wave of debate about the possible misuse and abuse of historical maps. The issue remains a highly sensitive one.

At the same time, however, it is also clear that in recent decades there has been another major shift in thinking about the problems posed by historical maps and how best to address them. While acknowledging the ongoing need for sensitivity to community concerns and potential misuse by malicious individuals, groups such as the BLL now openly criticize the practices of altering and suppressing historical maps that show outcaste communities or refer to them with pejorative terms. In response to an incident in 1990, for example, in which an institution in Niigata removed a map from an exhibit because it contained potentially offensive language, the BLL issued a statement saying that, rather than hiding such maps, “it is more desirable [for them] to be displayed together with a proper explanation [of the relevant issues].” Similarly, in 1994, responding to another incident in Niigata, the BLL commented that, “to simply cover things up will not solve anything. Instead, we must enlighten [people] about the history of discrimination embedded in the word eta.” Another important step came in 2001, when the Osaka Human Rights Museum (“Liberty Osaka”), with the support of the national BLL and many of its regional branches, hosted a special exhibition of historical maps depicting outcaste communities. Two years later, in October 2003, when the national BLL issued a general statement outlining its current position on the publication and exhibition of historical maps, it not only reaffirmed its opposition to the erasure and covering up of historical terms, but even went so far as to describe the demands it had made of Mitsukoshi in the 1960s to “buy back” maps and “stop sales” of any further copies, as a “clearly mistaken” (akiraka ni ayamatta) approach.

While some may be tempted to see this change simply as marking a return to common sense practice after a period of “politically correct” censorship, it is surely important to recognize the significant changes in societal context that have occurred since 1968. The 1969 Special Measures Law, which was allowed to expire in 2002, has not been without its critics, but there can be little doubt that during the decades of general economic growth and prosperity that followed its enactment many of the most obvious forms of inequality that had previously plagued, and marked, Buraku communities
came to be addressed, and general sensitivity to the issue of discrimination has also grown. This is certainly not to suggest that all aspects of the problem have been adequately resolved, or that the possibility of discrimination has been permanently consigned to the past. As recent work by scholars such as Timothy Amos and Joseph Hankins suggests, however, the issues have clearly become more nuanced and complex in recent decades. In particular, as some of the most obvious markers of Buraku difference have been eroded, groups such as the BLL have become increasingly concerned with questions of how to foster a positive sense of community identity, and promote awareness of the history out of which the movement first arose. It is, in large part, against this background that the recent shift in attitudes to the question of historical maps should be understood. As the BLL’s 2003 statement puts it, “Rather than shrinking before a phantasm of possible discrimination (sabetsu sareru kanōsei to iu gen’ei), let us boldly step forward to expand and deepen the possibilities for opposing discrimination.” In other words, rather than altering or covering up maps for fear they might be misused, it is better to make responsible use of them to discuss, explore and promote understanding of the problem and its ongoing implications.

There is, of course, no question that historical maps are potentially useful, not only for understanding the conditions in which members of oucaste communities lived, but also the ways in which such communities formed an integral part of the larger society, and, indeed, of the ways that outcaste geographies could sometimes play a critical role in shaping other aspects of social development and change. As an example of this let us turn, finally, to a brief consideration of another map from the Kobe area in the years immediately following the Meiji Restoration.

The map (Map 2) shows the lands of a village called Ujino in 1870, the third year of the Meiji era. In the top right-hand corner the seals of the headman and three other village officials have been affixed to the map to attest that its remarkably detailed record of local land use is accurate. The village lands have been divided up into a total of 420 plots, each of which has been numbered and marked with the name of an individual owner. Colors have also been used to indicate different kinds of land-use: Rice paddies are shown in light blue, other fields in yellow, and newly reclaimed paddy land (shinden) in off-white. The Uji River, which formed the village’s Western border, is shown in blue. Irrigation ponds are marked in a darker blue, embankments in brown, and roads in red. The large blank space at the top of the map represents a hilly area too steep for cultivation, while another area left blank at the lower left indicates land controlled by a neighboring...
village. Ujino itself, which is to say the houses of village residents, is shown close to the middle of the map, marked in orange. Two red torii gates, one at the base of the uncultivated hills, and another at the North Western corner of Ujino, indicate the presence of local shrines; a Buddhist temple can also be seen near the heart of the main settlement. At the Western edge of the map, however, we see a second Buddhist temple, in the middle of an area marked in purple. The map key indicates only that this area was known as Furonodani: This so-called “branch village”, within the territorial limits of Ujino, was, in fact, the same outcaste community marked on the 1868 map at the center of the Mitsukoshi controversy.

One immediate indicator of the disadvantages faced by Furonodani’s residents is its location on the banks of the Uji River, which made it prone to flooding. It is also instructive to note how small it is in comparison with the “main” peasant village of Ujino. From the records of a local census we know that in 1871 there were some 1093 people living in this tiny space. In Ujino, by contrast, an area perhaps three or four times as large, the total population, including servants, was around 400. The overall pattern of inequality is also clear from a consideration of landownership. The compilers of the map used a special prefix to indicate the names of outcaste landowners, and from this we can confirm that residents of Furonodani were mainly limited to farming a narrow strip of land around the edge of the community. In one area, just to the North of Furonodani, and immediately adjacent to the village graveyard, we see a particularly dense concentration of plots, too small to be properly mapped. The compilers here have simply listed the names of the outcaste owners.

With access to land so limited, it is hardly surprising that, according to the 1871 census, only a small number of Furonodani households listed farming as their primary occupation. As was true of many outcaste communities, some residents of Furonodani were responsible throughout the Tokugawa period for collecting the carcasses of dead animals (particularly cattle) from surrounding peasant communities. This helped ensure a strong connection to various kinds of leather work, but a wide variety of other occupational groups (day laborers, hair dressers, flower sellers etc) were represented too. The map also makes it clear that, in contrast to the lands controlled by Ujino peasants, only a very small portion of the land cultivated by Furonodani residents was used to grow rice. This may have been because Furonodani, like many outcaste communities, was exempt from the payment of annual rice taxes. Instead, its residents (together with those of another nearby outcaste community) had been required to perform special duties (yaku) in the old port town of Hyōgo: cleaning the area around the town’s administrative headquarters, clearing away the bodies of sick travellers and beggars found dead in the town streets, and helping with the administration of judicial punishments (displaying and guarding the severed heads of executed criminals etc.)

This long-standing connection to the management of poor, diseased and criminal bodies, helps explain one other striking aspect of the 1870 map of Ujino: the presence of both a “Western-style” hospital (dai byōin) and a workhouse (tokeijo).

As already noted above, in preparation for the opening of the new treaty port in 1868, Japanese officials had overseen the construction of a variety of new institutions in the area. Both the new hospital and the workhouse that appear on the 1870 Ujino village map are also marked on the 1868 Kobe map discussed above.
Looking back at the 1868 map (see Map 1 (2)), moreover, we see that a checkpoint (bansho) was also built on the edge of Ujino village, and that a new jailhouse (rōyashiki) had been established across the Uji river from Furonodani. A few years later Kobe’s first modern prison would also be built nearby. It is, of course, possible that other factors helped to shape the concentration of these particular institutions in this small area. Given the nature of the duties that had been performed by Furonodani’s residents under the old regime, however, there seems little doubt that this clustering was linked to an older geography of social inequality and hierarchy. From the very outset, then, Japanese modernity was being inflected and shaped by the legacies of the old status order, and, as we have seen above, it would take more than a century before the underlying issues would begin to be addressed by the broader society.

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**Notes**

1 I am grateful to Timothy Amos and Joseph Hankins for their assistance and advice with the preparation of this article. Needless to say, all errors of fact and interpretation are my responsibility alone.


5 On the background to this decree, see Noah McCormack, *Japan’s Outcaste Abolition: The Struggle for National Inclusion and the Making of the Modern State* (London: Routledge,
2012). The relevant literature in Japanese is too vast to summarize here, but see, for example, Uesugi Satoshi, *Meiji Ishin to Senmin haishi-rei* (Osaka: Kaihō shuppansha, 1990).


7 Although it is a problematic text, and needs to be evaluated with care, English-language readers are able to get some sense of the situation as it stood in the late 1960s from George De Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, eds., *Japan’s Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).


10 For a useful chronology of events in this period, including media reports, see Asada Zennosuke, *Sabetsu to tatakai tsuzukete: Buraku kaibō undō gojūnen* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1969), 321-2. I am grateful to Timothy Amos for this reference.

11 For a general overview of the process leading up to the initial decision in 1968, see Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, Ch. 8. For the Justice Ministry’s 2008 ruling affirming that the early Meiji family records should not be open to public inspection, see