

A Socio-historical study about the marginalized status of Japanese leather workers

[Yuko Nishimura]

Abstract— This paper reflects on the low social status of Japan's leatherworkers, whose position in the social hierarchy has for centuries been that of untouchables or *Burakumin* (outcastes) and who were sometimes called by the most derogatory of Japanese terms, '*eta*,' which means 'filth.' There are three economic and historical roots to this enduring social stigma, two of them having to do with the demand of the military for leather armor, saddlery and other gear. First, in the 16th century, a truce between warring clans, achieved by the Tokugawa shogunate, brought with it a decrease in the demand for leather armor and other military trappings, thereby undermining the economic base of buraku communities; (2) at the same time, weak Japanese guilds left leather workers in servitude to leather merchants and the state, ultimately forcing them to accept their social status as untouchable pollutants and (3) the Meiji restoration in the late 19th century included a modernized military that required copious amounts of leather gear, and the business, so lucrative made powerful business élites wrested control from the Burakumin. The occupational taboo against working with leather remained attached to the modern Buraku community, as Japanese leather workers failed in their struggle for improved social status. The paper compares Japanese craft guilds, which kept the leather workers as bonded labour, with European medieval craftsmen guilds, which had already provided a system of training through apprenticeship, contracts, and fixed wages for skilled workers.

Keywords— *leather workers, Japanese untouchables, the pure and the impure, guilds, pollution*

Introduction

According to recent arguments^[1], in the medieval Western European societies, artisanal guilds had already achieved certain autonomy which prepared a platform for workers in the Industrial Revolution. The relationship between the guilds and the state was one of mutual dependence, as the guilds were essential for market expansion in pre-industrial societies. Instead of depending on bonded labor and limited domestic labor supply, guilds started to seek for a wider supply of labor through training, and fixed wages were paid based on contract^[2]. Craft guilds provided rather long training periods of over six years, offering fixed wages by contract^[3]. As for the relation of leather craftsmen and merchants' guilds, due to the complexity of the manufacturing process and the large profits leather offered, a larger number of leather guilds sprang

up than in other sectors, sometimes creating a mutual quality control system.

In Japan however, the relationship between the two was more hierarchical. According to Nagata, Japanese guilds (*za*), originally autonomous mercantile brotherhood organizations in the 16th century, were dismantled by the pre-feudal samurai lord Hideyoshi. They were forced to serve the Tokugawa regime, which for two and a half centuries starting from the early 17th century governed Japan. During this time, according to Nagata, guilds were mainly commercial associations of business owners rather than artisanal associations^[4].

In the U.K., the mobility of the journeymen system promoted technological dispersal. The journeymen from less developed regions sometimes underwent long-term training outside of their own region or country, returning home with new knowledge^[5]. Lucassen also notes that labor mobility enabled innovation prior to the Industrial Revolution.^[6]

Guilds occasionally challenged secular authority in order to protect their autonomy and interests; leather guilds were often prominent in such conflicts. There was, for instance, a long-term battle between the British government and the tanners' guilds regarding attempts to limit and tax the importation of sumac, an important source of tannin. It was a battle tanners won after considerable time and sacrifice^[7]. It should be noted that the development of artisanal guilds in medieval U.K. society vastly affected the institutional and political structure of towns; by the 13th century, guild leaders governed many townships.

The British leather industry had been lucrative from inception; it consequently parceled its profits into several sub-sectors. The butchers for example were permitted to sell skin and hides only to tanners, and in turn the tanners were restricted to selling their finished products to curriers. The curriers were authorized to refuse acceptance of the product if it did not satisfy the standards of their examination. Direct sale of leather from tanners to shoemakers was forbidden, but since no one other than tanners were authorized to collect hides, tanners were thereby protected as well. Between the 10th and 17th centuries the leather guild divided into more than 16 categories: tanners, saddlers, curriers, gurdlers, shoemakers, pointmakers, skimmers, pouchmakers, glovers, coifferers, whitetawyers, cordwinders, dyers, furriers, and leather sellers. Although relative wealth varied between leather merchants and other specialists, professional respect prevailed. The six-to-seven year apprenticeship for a tanner strongly supported this professional respect.

Considering that market orientation galvanized the autonomy of leather-guilds elsewhere, one cannot help but wonder why the social status of the Japanese leather-workers remained abysmal.

I. Untouchability and Leatherworkers in India and Japan

Both in India and Japan, people who engage in leather work (particularly those who engage in skinning, tanning and slaughter) are considered to be Untouchables, or outcasts: literally, those without a caste. Untouchables (the preferred term in India is “Dalits”: the depressed) are those who are hereditarily limited to occupations associated with the collection and disposal of human or animal waste; even those who escape to “clean” occupations are still considered ritually polluted^[8]. According to Dumont, the principle of the pure and impure regulates interpersonal relationships among individuals. It dictates marital relationships, food, and occupation. Women cannot marry men of a lower caste because such marriage would lower their social status and pollute the community. Cooked food cannot be accepted from people of a lower caste because it would pollute the body. Every Hindu must therefore confine relationships and interactions to a restricted endogamous circle called a *jati* (sub-caste). One’s ritual status must be preserved by not touching a pollutant or otherwise incurring pollution. Since handling of human corpses or dead animals involves touching a pollutant, anyone who engages in such activity is deeply polluted.

This model of the caste system generates a hierarchy of purity and pollution that justifies the restriction of social interaction. The dichotomy of the pure and the impure is often observable in other animistic religions; Japanese Shinto beliefs, for example, had previously derived the concept of uncleanness (*kegare*) from death. The belief existed in the 6th century, before the introduction of Buddhism, but intensified from the influence of Buddhism. The concept of untouchability, having strengthened the formation of social hierarchy, dramatically altered the Japanese conception of pollution^[9]. This was a cogent force behind the centuries-long discrimination against Japanese leather-workers.

Leather and fur have been traditionally associated with animal carcasses. Unlike Western or Islamic cultures, Indian and Japanese cultures regard animal skin and hides as a source of “ritual” pollution. Samurai warriors (or Kshatriya warriors) wore armor partially covered by leather, but leather, being a pollutant, could never be part of the holy costume of a Buddhist or Brahmin priest. However, the ancient Japanese scriptures give contradictory evidence as to whether ritual pollution was the originating concept of the Untouchables.

II. Indefinite Truce and Leather Workers in late medieval Japan

In his discussion of the post-medieval samurai regime, i.e. the Tokugawa shogunate, Nakao asseverates that the transformation of the hereditary status of leather workers took place in the 17th century^[10]. The skilled leather craftsmen were under the control of their own chieftain, who in turn was subject to the regime. Nakao persuasively argues that the

status transformation of leather workers between the 15th and 17th centuries coincides with the arrival of an indefinite truce achieved by the Tokugawa shogunate. During the nearly constant warring period between the 14th and the 16th centuries, the expanding demand for leather compelled regional samurai lords to secure leather craftsmen in their territories by providing protection and tax-exempt status. The collapse of military demand for leather goods, due to the final victory of the Tokugawa in the 17th century, catalyzed the depreciation of the leather craftsmen. Although demand for leather as a luxury item (such as leather sandals, boxes, and screens) still remained, it was not comparable to the volume of war-time demand. Under the Shogunate, a large number of hereditary leather workers were ordered to shift to the sectors of local policing, punishment, and execution, all of which were considered to be polluting. The Tokugawa government’s divide-and-rule policy pressed the social status of the leather worker/executioner/policing Burakumin beneath the status of the peasant. Apparently this was the historical moment at which they became useful as scapegoats; the Burakumin who had previously been conceived as “kawata,” the leather workers, now became, explicitly, the Untouchables, “eta”, the filth.

III. Leather Craftsman tradition in Islamic and European countries

In Japan, there are still small-scale tanneries in old ex-untouchable neighborhoods. Most residents there are still called burakumin, a modern synonym for the Untouchables. Their traditional occupations are related either to scavenging (recycling the waste) or leather work. Despite the high quality of their leatherwork by international standards, the tannery owners and workers are conceived to be different from “normal” Japanese; they are still burakumin. In many Asian countries, not only Japan, the religious ideology of pure/impure still stigmatizes some communities. But such stigmata may not necessarily have derived from such ideology.

While horse-riding nomads wore leather clothes and preferred leather boots, Chinese Hans as agriculturalists wore cotton or silk clothes and shoes. The strong antipathy against nomads such as the Mongols might have created a scornful attitude against leather items, influencing aristocrats to prefer shoes and clothes made of satin or cotton as an expression of ‘high culture.’ The Buddhism that merged with Confucianism in China and Korea discouraged animal killing and hence entailed vegetarianism. On the other hand, descendants of the Muslim Mongols and Tatars adopted from their Islamic tradition the position that except for pig skin, leather is not impure; butchery and leatherwork are respectable parts of their mainstream cultural tradition. The strong influence of Confucianism on Korea during the Li dynasty produced a quite different situation. The Paekjong, i.e. those engaged in butchery and leatherwork, apparently derived from the Tatar clans. Social stratification marginalized the Paekjong.^[11] They were sequestered as the lower caste by reason of their nomadic

lifestyle and traditional trade in butchery and leatherwork. By the early twentieth century however, having lost their genealogical records during the process of urbanization, their status as Untouchables was said to have 'almost' disappeared. Rhim however maintains that the occupational stigma of meat-processing still inflicts implicit discrimination on them.

Rhim enumerates several hypotheses about their origin. According to one legend, Prince Hau of Tan'gun, the founder of the Korean Kingdom of 2333 B.C., assigned cattle-slaughter to the Paekjong. Another legend claims that when Kija, of the Un Dynasty, founded Pyongyang as his capital, he assigned all criminals to the most despised social class, the *chonmin*, who subsequently became the Paekjong. A scholar of 18th-century Korean methodology, Jung Yak Yong, maintains that the Paekjong were offshoots of the nomadic Tatars, similarly as the people of Mongo Hans and Manchuria. Originally having been nomadic, the Paekjong wandered through the marshlands instead of undergoing assimilation into the mainstream population. They manufactured and sold willow baskets, slaughtered animals, and hunted; leatherwork remained their main source of support. The people of the Koryo Dynasty, who had already become Buddhists, despised the lifestyle of the Paekchong, who thereupon received their status as Untouchables.

A new turn intervened in the 13th century, when the Mongol invasions made meat-eating popular in Korea. Butchery and leatherwork once again became the main occupation of the Paekchong as their product came into greater demand. The historical data indicate how the occupational differences between nomadic-cattle herders and agriculturalist-merchants wrought a great contrast between Islamic and Buddhist traditions.

Muslims and Untouchables managed the leather work in India; both groups were alien to the mainstream Hindu practice of vegetarianism, which had originated from Jainism and Buddhism. The Aryans settled in Northern India roughly around 2000 B.C.E.; they were horse-riders and cattle-herders whose sacrificial rites involved the slaughter of cows and buffaloes. The Dravidians, by contrast much earlier inhabitants than the Aryans, were agriculturalists. Throughout the Aryan period Indians did not make butchery or leatherwork taboo; in the Vedic religion Brahmin priests officiated over sacrificial rituals comprising beef-eating.

To the present day villagers continue to officiate meat-eating religious sacrifice of goats and hens. The 2006 Hindu-CNN-IBN *State of the Nation Survey* states that 31% of Indians are vegetarians; if the 9% who eat eggs are discounted, then only 22% are vegetarians. It follows that the mainstream religious principle of vegetarianism does not account for discrimination against Untouchables. More plausibly, the contempt of their pre-modern heritage of impoverishment shod them into the position of the modern underclass. The introduction of chrome tanning in the 19th century suddenly made the leather industry extremely lucrative, in India as well as elsewhere.

The highest concentration of Muslim and Untouchable population is located in Tamil Nadu, formerly during the

British Raj the Madras Presidency. In Tamil Nadu, even today the Muslim and Untouchable population is most highly concentrated in North Arcot, which is the center of leather work; it constitutes 53.3% of all Indian leather industry. Japanese leather industry exhibits a close parallel; over 50% of Japanese leather production is located in Hyogo prefecture, the heartland of the previously untouchable leather workers. A large part of the Hindu untouchables and Muslim population in North Arcot is still engaged in its traditional industries: butchery and leather tanning.

IV. Pollution theory in Japan

With the introduction of Buddhism in the 8th century, Japan absorbed the principles of the pure/impure and vegetarian/non-vegetarian hierarchy, similar to that of Hinduism. Just like Hindu ideology, the Japanese Buddhist dichotomy of pure and impure is based on a vegetarian and non-vegetarian hierarchical opposition that slowly entered into the minds of the people. It captured the aristocrats who adopted Buddhism; in consequence rice came to be regarded as the superior, and meat as the inferior, diet. Even the samurai regime inadvertently raised the symbolic importance of rice by having made it the basis of taxation. Although people still continued eating game animals such as wild fowl and hens, as well as fish, the Buddhistic notion of the pure and impure infiltrated the stratified feudalistic social hierarchy. The post-medieval samurai regime promoted a four-layer status hierarchy: samurai (warriors), peasants, artisans /merchants, and the Untouchables; this further intensified the distinction between the peasant-commoners and nomad-Untouchables. The regime used this distinction to justify heavy exploitation of the ordinary peasants, who were mollified by their feeling of superiority to the Untouchables.

While most communities tolerated fish-eating, they condemned meat-eating, particularly of big animals such as horse and cows, at least among the commoners; the Samurais who like the Indian Kshatriyas, still practiced hunting wild animals as a sport, were excepted. Accordingly, meat-eating was not condemned as a whole, whereas eating the meat of big animals, particularly of cattle and horse, was condemned as malicious and degrading conduct practiced only by the Untouchables. Making skins and hides from slaughtered animals was supposed to be one of the most polluting acts. The dichotomy of pure/impure nevertheless served as a pretext for discrimination against the leather workers, although the ruling samurai class and the commoners continued eating meat (and even beef) to a certain extent. During the Tokugawa period (16th-19th century), the chieftains of the Untouchable communities were the exclusive leather handlers. Dan zaemon, the chieftain of the untouchable Etas in Kanto region for example, enjoyed enormous wealth from handling leather and was designated by the Tokugawa government to control the Untouchables of the Kanto region. He and other Untouchable chieftains, working with the big merchants in major cities and along with the local lords and the Tokugawa

government, shared the enormous wealth created by the leather business.

However, the regime assigned Dan zaemon and other Untouchable chieftains to engage in local policing, crime-hunting and execution for the samurai police force. The Untouchables rather than the samurai performed the notorious public executions so that the commoners' fear and hatred would attach to the Untouchables as pollution. Cleaning up the human and animal corpses in public places was also assigned to them and the Untouchable chieftains used a large number of starving, homeless drifters for public works. Such jobs regarded as degrading and demeaning to the general public perpetuated the pollution stigma that motivated their dejection into an underclass, according to Nakao 1992.

Their status was elevated to the so-called 'new' citizenship after the Emperor's 1864 emancipation edict, which announced the end of the Tokugawa regime and the arrival of 'westernization' and 'modernization'. But they also lost the privilege of tax exemption, and the privileged receipt of skin and hides of the locally available animal corpses, as had been exclusively awarded to them by the Tokugawas, the privileges were rescinded because new groups, namely the modern military government and the big merchants intended on using modern technology to appropriate the lucrative markets of the shoe industry and military leather goods. The military had required great amounts of leather for shoes, boots, and other military equipment. Preparation for international wars entailed a monopoly of the leather supply. Even during W.W. II, leather trade associations and tanners' associations had no choice but to merge; skin and hides were rationed. No leather dealer was allowed to import raw skin and hides for tanning without government permission. According to the tanners, most tanners' association members had been arrested for their so-called 'illegal holding' of skin and hides. (To this day, Japanese tanners come from the ex-untouchable community but this is not necessarily the case for big scale leather businesses.)

Government control persisted even after the Japanese defeat in 1945. It was only after 1950 that government released control, allowing tanners to import skins and hides without government interference. In 1945, 47,941t of cowhide were imported; by 1963 the import volume tripled. This exhibits how robustly the Japanese economy was growing. Cowhide importation was liberalized finally in 1960; importation of other skins and hides was liberalized in 1965. This was the first time in Japanese history that leather goods importation made a benchmark. The number of tanners also increased during the high economic growth period of the 1960s and 70s. This heyday for Japanese tanners and the leather industry did not last long. As early as 1970, Japanese tanners and shoemakers started to lose the war against the cheaper leather products from developing countries, particularly from China. Many tanneries and shoe factories closed down. Only some survived in Hyogo prefecture, which is situated in the western part of Japan.

V. Conclusion

In the medieval U.K., where there was a clear division of labor between tanners, curriers, cordwinders, and saddlers, each had a well established regional guild association protecting their interests. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, neither medieval nor post-medieval Japan provided such a guild organization to protect the artisans. This was one of the key factors that degraded the status of hereditary leather workers. In addition, the pure /impure discrimination theory was contrived to bind the Japanese leather workers as bonded laborer. Incorporation of the leather workers in the crime-and-punishment sector had been deliberately implemented to divert hate and fear away from the regime and onto the Untouchables. The handling of animal and human corpses justified the degradation of the Untouchables to the lowest possible level; the misery of the Untouchables comforted the peasants with the impression that they did not suffer as badly as the Untouchables.

On the one hand, in Europe, the stronger demand of skilled labor prompted crafts guilds to take a different approach. Under the influence of Roman law, they used guilds as a training institution for the provision of a stable labour supply not through coercion but through the mutual interest of master craftsmen (employers) and journeymen (employees). Such a trained workforce, based on wage payment, became the platform for modern civil society. In Japan, however, the regime's hierarchical social stratification subjected the leather workers as bonded labor thus keeping them intact as a cheap labor supply as a modern underclass in Japan.

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Yuko Nishimura acquired her Ph.D. from the London School of Economics; she is presently active as a professor of Social Anthropology. She specializes in community development and minorities study in Asia, and is sometimes a collaborator in JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) for community development. In this paper, she answers the following questions: Is Japan's leather workers' low social status due to the Buddhistic theory of the pure vs. impure?

Much has been said about this pollution theory as the basis of caste-like hierarchy in India, Korea, and Japan. But this paper proposes to look at a more socio-economic historical background, comparing their weak guild organizations with the European ones which were stronger and more egalitarian. While Japanese craftsmen guilds kept the leather workers bonded, European, medieval craftsmen guilds established the system of apprenticeship, supported by contracts and fixed wages.