

## **'Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan' by Timothy Amos**

In his book, Tim Amos (Japanese Studies) re-examines the burakumin, Japan's largest minority group, to review their history and the category of the outcaste in Japan.

The burakumin, Japan's largest minority group, have been the focus of an extensive yet strikingly homogenous body of Japanese language research. The master narrative in much of this work typically links burakumin to premodern occupational groups which engaged in a number of socially polluting tasks like tanning and leatherwork. This master narrative, however, when subjected to close scrutiny, tends to raise more questions than it answers, particularly for the historian. Is there really firm historical continuity between premodern outcaste and modern burakumin communities? Is the discrimination experienced by historic and contemporary outcaste communities actually the same? Does the way burakumin frame their own experience significantly affect mainstream understandings of their plight?

This book is the result of a decade-and-a-half-long search for answers to these questions. Based on an extensive array of original archival material, ethnographical research, and critical historiographical work, it argues that there needs to be a fundamental reconceptualisation of the buraku problem for two main reasons. First, the master narrative is built on empirically and conceptually questionable foundations; and second, mainstream accounts tend to overlook the very important role burakumin and other interested parties play in the construction and maintenance of the narrative. By continually drawing a straight line between premodern outcaste groups and today's burakumin, and equating the types of discrimination suffered by members of this community today with that faced by their premodern counterparts, the Japanese government, the general population, scholars, and burakumin activists tend to overlook some of the real changes that have often taken place both in who is identified as members of socially marginalized groups in Japan and how they experience that identification. Clinging to this master narrative, moreover, serves to restrict the ways in which burakumin can productively and more inclusively identify in the present to imagine a liberated future for themselves.

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