

A study of the post-medieval animal carcasses processing community and their *danna-ba* privileges in Japan ——a cross-cultural comparative approach¹

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Summary:

This paper discusses the social structure of the skin and hides processing community in the post-medieval Japanese era. It focuses on the so-called *danna-ba*, the hamlets of commoners which were tied to certain *Eta* or the untouchable community of the area. This paper argues each *danna-ba* as the bundle of rights and duties granted to a specific untouchable community in a nearby untouchable hamlet. A particular privilege such as taking the disposed animal carcasses (the hides of which could be made into leather) for free is also included as a hereditary right to the untouchable community. The privilege was given only to the attached *Eta* community in exchange for specific services assigned to the *Eta* community. In this paper, the culture-specific social hierarchy inside and outside the *danna-ba* will be discussed, comparing it with that in *jajman* relationship in India. Unlike in the UK where the carcass processing business was conducted based on guilds and on profitability-based extensive business network, the Japanese carcass processing business network was highly controlled by an authority, which depended on

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the pseudo-magico-religious ideology of pollution.

I. Tokugawa shogunate and the pollution rule

1-1: The role of *chori* in the post-medieval Japan

There were a number of untouchable castes who lived on the margins of society in post-medieval Japan. The two major untouchable communities were the *Eta* (*the polluted*) and the *Hinin* (*the inhuman*). Although indispensable to both commoners and the authorities, they were forced to stay on the fringes of society.

Among the untouchables, there were also internal hierarchies established by the Tokugawa shogunate. *Eta* were above *Hinin*. In the Kanto region, a few *Eta* chieftains were called *Chori* (low ranked government servants)². Their status was passed down from generation to generation while they assisted authorities by capturing criminals and serving as jail wardens (Kobayashi et.al 1990). *Chori* also assisted low-level *samurai* in executions. The *samurai* were allowed to use swords to decapitate the condemned, but the handling of the headless corpse, now ‘polluted’, was assigned to the *chori*³. In this public work, *Chori* could use *Hinin* as assistants (Okuma 2011, Sakai 2011). *Hinin* could also assist *Eta* in the disposal of animal carcasses (Okuma 2011, Sakai 2011), but for the most part, *Hinin* roles were confined to garbage collecting, scavenging and demolishing buildings (Takayanagi 1974).

1-2: The animal skin and hides related business relationships in the 17th century

If one compares 17th century Japan and the UK in terms of the power relationships

2 For historical discussion on *chori*, see Kita (2008), Fujisawa (2011), Okuma (2011).

3 This information was given to me by Mr. Seisuke Fujisawa, a buraku historian. While I was conducting a Tokyo buraku neighborhood fieldwork between 2000 and 2010, Mr. Fujisawa guided me by introducing people and by providing information. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to him.

between the leather manufacturers and the government, there are significant differences. While the latter enjoyed considerable amount of autonomy backed up by craftsmen guilds, the former did not. There was a guild-like organization called *za* (the seat), but this was organized only by the commoner merchants who were handling the finished leather (Deguchi 2007).

The major difference comes from the fact that the complex business distribution network in the English leather manufacturing sector was already established by the 17th century. On the other hand, in Japan, it was ruled by the government and there was no self-governed organization which could serve as a medium to undercut the power of the government. Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa shogunate from the early 17th century until the late 19th century and leather making businesses were completely controlled by the government.

The shogunate subjugated all the warring-states' *samurai* lords, achieving a permanent truce that lasted 250 years and created a robust consumer society well before Japan opened its doors to the West in the Meiji Era. In order to establish a stable society, the shogunate imposed a social hierarchy in which the *samurai* (the warriors class) were placed at the top. The *samurai* no longer needed to go to war, nevertheless they continued to serve as retainers to their feudal lords. Second to *samurai* were farmers since their role as the rice growers were essential to maintain Japan's agricultural economy. Third came the craftsmen and merchants. Most *samurai* relied on merchants for loans. The merchants, by handling goods and services, often became rich. In fact, some well-to-do merchants even made marriage alliances with powerful *samurai* families. Nevertheless, the formal social order placed mercantile activities lower than either craftsmen or agricultural producers.

Peasants, craftsmen and merchants were considered 'commoners' and as townspeople they mixed freely in day-to-day transactions (Fujisawa 2001). However, "Untouchables," including the *Eta* and *Hinin* did not belong to any of the aforementioned classes. They were strictly banned from intermarrying and associating with commoners and were

forbidden to engage in the occupations and businesses of commoners.

Handling animal carcasses was considered to be polluting and those who did so were called *Eta* ('the filthy') and the leather tanning industry was assigned to them exclusively. Even though many *Eta* were, in fact, engaged in farming and agricultural work, their principle 'assigned' tasks involved the skinning and tanning of the animal carcasses.

Bound by Buddhist pollution codes, in some areas, *Eta* were forbidden to undertake the dismantling of animal carcasses in daytime. Also, they were relegated to their own communities and often were not allowed to travel routes used by commoners and *samurai*. The shogunate adopted the 'rule' that animal carcasses were polluting and by using such magico-religious notions of ritual pollution they were successful in maintaining the social orders.

However, until polyvinyl chloride replaced leather, leather production was essential for military equipment. And, it was the *Eta*, also called *kawata*, (peasants of leather 'field') who produced leather following the skinning and tanning of animal carcasses. The handling of cows and horses also required "veterinary" skills and *Eta* community was good at it. They also used cattle guts and organs to produce medical remedies for humans (Saito & Oishi 1995). Some prominent *Eta* families were good at producing medicines and had high profile clients such as shogunate and local daimyos (Saito 2003).

1-3: 17th century English animal carcass related jobs

On the other hand, in 17th century The UK, the production of leather was 'secularized.' Handling of animal carcasses was not considered 'polluting' but was considered a business with the distribution and production of leather and leather products controlled by craft and mercantile guilds. As Yeomans (2017) described it, the leather industry was a major British industry helping to pave the way for the forthcoming industrial revolution (Thomson 1981, 1990).

In the post-medieval, post-plague era of the 17th century, the population in Europe grew dramatically and the consumption of meat skyrocketed (Thomson 1983).

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Animal carcasses and the by-products of skin and hides became plentiful due to the increase of meat consumption. The increasing population led to a growing demand for footwear as well as clothing. Likewise, the increase in trade and commerce required improved trunk roads to accommodate more traffic and larger vehicles, which also increased the demand for leather. The growing demand for leather, required a quicker way to make leather, leading to the discovery and use of chromium for tanning (Thomson 2002).

By the late 18th century, there were tanneries in every village; in the suburbs of London, there were more than 200 (Thomson, 2002). In Japan, the manufacturing and distribution of leather was controlled by central and the local governments through a caste-like system. While the workers in the skinning and tanning sector worked on the most laborious and time-consuming jobs they were the least rewarded. Most of the profit came from distribution and this trade sector was controlled by wealthy commoner merchants who were willing to pay dues to the government authorities.

In the UK, on the other hand, the leather industry was regulated by mercantile and craft guilds. The guild even challenged government authorities when the government tried to interfere with their dealings (Thomson 2002). In 1563, a decree, ostensibly to assure the so-called quality control of leather-related finished products was enacted by the English Parliament. The government was trying to require raw hides procured from slaughterers (butchers) to be sold only to raw-hide tanneries. The tanned leather was then to be sold only to leather specialists such as shoemakers, belt makers and glove makers. But not to brokers and not to consumers directly. It was an attempt by the government to control the leather industry. Leather had to be bought and sold at 'official' prices--private sales and haggling were not permitted. This decree by the government was a failure. It met with fierce resistance by the tanners' guilds because it impacted their profits and blocked the smooth circulation of tanned leather to necessary leather craft guilds. Therefore, active lobbying of Parliament by leather-finishing guilds successfully overturned the decree. As leather tanning became a more profitable business, the social status of tannery owners, fur traders and skimmers (as well as meat producers) significantly improved, as did their

wealth. Their prosperity continued until the power of guilds was impaired in the early 19th century by the industrial revolution.

1-4: Meat Consumption and untouchability

The pollution theory prohibited Japanese from consuming beef, pork, and horse meat on a large scale. Thus, the meat industry did not develop in Japan where the primary foods were rice, millet, fish, pulse and vegetables. Prohibited by Buddhistic teaching, the slaughter of cattle was forbidden and only dead animal carcasses could be dismembered. In 1685, the 5th Shogun Tsunayoshi even announced a special law to prohibit the cruelty to animals (Harada 1996).

Throughout Tokugawa period, cows and horses were raised primarily for agriculture and transportation. Deer and wild boar hunting was tolerated only to protect agricultural produce. The eating of deer, wild boar, wild birds, and pheasants was allowed to a certain extent, but eating beef, pork, horse meat and dog meat was forbidden.

The consumption of cattle and horse meat became associated with untouchable communities largely because they also handled both human corpses and animal carcasses. Those who hereditarily handled corpses and carcasses were considered untouchables. As in the Indian caste system, the pollution was hereditarily transferred to specific endogamous communities assigned to the handling of corpses and carcasses. Even if an individual or family did not engage in this work, they were still considered to be untouchable by birth and not allowed to engage in commoners' jobs.

II. Japanese *Danna-ba* and Indian *Jajman* system

2-1: Abolishment of *danna-ba* in Meiji era

In exchange for ritual and community services to the *dannaba* hamlet to which they were attached, the *Eta* received gratuities (alms) and gifts from higher status people in the *dannaba* (Shiomi 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Thus, the *Eta* community was in panic when

the Meiji government's Liberation Act of 1871 legally emancipated *Eta* and *Hinin* took away the privileges they used to have from their *dannaba* system. Although they were renamed as 'new commoners' this did not entail any privileges. Moreover, "liberation" also ended their hereditary right to free animal carcasses which was vital to make leather. The 'former' *eta* community petitioned to retain their rights attached to *dannaba*, but their appeal was rejected (Saito 2011).

The Meiji government set out to meet the pressing needs to modernize the Japanese military and they needed to manufacture modern weapons and equipments in Japan itself. Since leather was one of the crucial commodities to the military, the leather industry also needed to modernize its production method. Industrialization in large scale took place by importing western technology and a few well-to do businessmen entered this field to produce military boots and equipments. Cattle ranches were started to provide meat such as beef to the soldiers to strengthen their stamina. Out of the meat, the hides were produced and were used to make strong leather for military boots and equipments. Modern shoe factories were started by entrepreneurs who hired western specialists who could teach them how to do the modern way of tanning. The 'new commoners' had to learn how to make hard leather from scratch. As a community, the loss of the privilege of taking animal carcass for free was more serious. Now the animal carcass was put into free market competition and the tanners had to purchase the hides. Because of the serious shortage of hides, the entrepreneurs even imported skin and hides from abroad.

The *Eta* community even now had to face strong antipathy from the villagers of non-*eta* community who resented the privileges given to *eta* community through *danna-ba*.

2-2: *Dhan* and *danna-ba*

The term *danna* in Japanese originated from Sanskrit word '*dhana*'—the gift. According to the Japanese Kojien dictionary, *Danna* signifies (1) patron 2) master (of a house, shop, etc.), or 3) husband (in informal usages). Therefore, the common usage today often signifies a patron of a mistress, geisha, nightclub hostess. *Ba* on the

other hand, signifies a place. Therefore, *danna-ba* literally means the place offered by someone's patron. However, in order to avoid confusion, this paper will explain *danna-ba* not as the location but as a patronizing 'system' given to a certain *eta* community which was situated in the nearby location. *Dannaba* did not exist to the non-untouchable community. They never called themselves as *danna* or their hamlet as *danna-ba* since *danna-ba* only existed in the minds of the untouchable community attached to a certain area where they enjoyed the privilege of getting the animal skin and some fringe benefits given by their patrons. Therefore, different *Eta* communities were attached to different *danna-ba*. It is more suitable to mention *danna-ba* as a patron-client hierarchical relationship between a commoners' particular village and a particular *Eta* community which were bound by the relationship of gift-giving and gift-taking.

This definition also makes Indian *jajman* system much closer to *danna-ba* system. However, it is still confusing when one tries to compare Indian notion of *dhan* and the Japanese notion of *danna*.

In Buddhistic usage in Japan, *danna* means a 'donor' of a higher status who is giving alms; *danka* means the patrons supporting their temple, which is an inherited responsibility. For an *Eta* community, *danna-ba* means the territorial boundaries where they can expect some privileges in the form of alms (or *dhana*). *Danna-ba* includes *suteba*, the animal carcass disposal place and they could get the carcass for free. They also had duties attached to their *danna-ba* offering including the aforementioned policing, hunting of criminals, and serving as jail wardens. In exchange, they were entitled to a big bundle of paddy once a year from all houses which were situated in *danna-ba*. The bundle of rice was given by the commoner families who lived in the locality which was called *danna-ba* by the untouchable families of the area.

This action of gifting the carcass for free is backed up by the strong notion of 'pollution' which should not be absorbed by the commoners. By forbidding the commoners to handle the carcass, the shogunate carefully separated the commoners and the untouchables. By touching the human corpse or animal carcasses, ordinary people were

believed to be polluted. The reason why only *Eta* people were allowed to do certain ritual purification rites before the festival started was due to this belief of their ‘purification power’. When any carcass was found in the castle, temple, or shrine, it was *Eta*’s job to ‘clean’, i.e. to get rid of it. Therefore, they were often called *kiyome* (the purifier) and *soji-yaku* (the cleaner), even though they did not engage in physical ‘cleaning’ and ‘dusting’. In exchange for such ritual duties, the Untouchables, particularly the *Eta*, were given certain privileges through *danna-ba*.

The Indian notion of *dhan* also means the religious gift which should be given to the receiver without expecting a return since *dhan* accumulates religious merit to the donor himself. *Dhan* is therefore given to some Brahmin priests at funerals, who would receive the gifts on behalf of the mourner. By taking the role of the deceased, Brahmin priests also take *dhan* from the chief mourner. Feeding the poor during the deceased person’s ceremony, *dhan* can be also given to the poor to accumulate merits to the donor. Thus, the Japanese patron-client relationship involving *danna-ba* has a parallel in the village based *jajman* system in India.

2-3: A comparison between jajman system in India and danna-ba in Japan

Jajman is a hereditary reciprocal patron-client relationship in which each caste group within a village is expected to give certain standardized services to the families of other castes. According to Kolenda, *Jajmani* system is ‘a system of distribution in Indian villages whereby high-caste landowning families called *jajmans* are provided services and products by various lower castes such as carpenters, potters, blacksmiths, watercarriers, sweepers, and lanundrymen.’ (Kolenda 1963). The important duties for the lower castes are to exercise their capacity to absorb pollution by handling clothing and other things defiled by birth or death pollution of higher castes while the landowning *jajmans* pay the serving castes in kind, with grain, clothing, sugar, fodder, and animal products like butter and milk (Kolenda 1963). In this system, the village can maintain its self-sufficiency at the expense of enforced hierarchical order. This definition of the

privileges is similar to the one associated with *danna-ba* in Japan. But in this case, it also intensified the internal status hierarchy among the *Eta* community.

According to Okuma (2011), privileges associated with *danna-ba* secured the status for certain *chori* families as chieftains, as shown in the local government registration: they were called *komae*, different from *mizunomi*, the non-holder of *danna-ba*. The rights to have access to *danna-ba* became the asset and as the hereditary rights, they could even sell it or could pawn their ‘rights’ attached to *danna-ba*. By being entitled to have the hereditary rights to *danna-ba*, the *chori* could use *Hinin* for personal use but *Hinin* labor could be used only if the aforementioned *komae* families had the *danna ba* rights. (Okuma 2011). They were also given extra gifts of wheat and bundles of rice paddy by the senior villagers (ibid.) .

Conclusion:

With their secularism and capitalistic mode of pursuing profitability, British society achieved modernization of the leather industry in the post-medieval time. Japan and India could not take this route. The difficulty for these countries was the religious notion of the pure and the impure which has survived for centuries. Has the notion of pollution based status hierarchy continued to function in these societies? It is hard to say since the discrimination against the former ‘new commoners’ has continued to this day.

The class system is more fluid: one can climb up the social hierarchy quickly as one attains economic upliftment. On the other hand, caste-oriented untouchability seems to work hand in hand with the economic inequality brought by westernization in the 19th century. The patron- client relationship was discontinued at that time by the government, but the government ended up playing the role of their patron.

A comparative study of *jajman* and *danna-ba* might illustrate the core of untouchability from the socio-economic point of view. It might also show how such a magiro-religious notions can be the backbone of socio-economic hierarchy of labor exploitation in the

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leather industry of Japan and India post-medieval era.

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