



IJS Lecture Series: Japan in Historical Context

How Burakumin became Japanese

Abstract:

In the West *burakumin* are often defined straightforwardly as descendants of Japan's outcaste communities. However, genealogical definitions of *burakumin* (and arguably minority communities in general) limit our understanding in two critical ways. First, somatic conceptualizations of minority groups conflate socially articulated taxonomies with intrinsic properties. Second, 'biologized' notions of *burakumin* fail to capture the profound transformations that have taken place within the *buraku* phenomenon over the years, transformations which have expanded, contracted, and radically reconfigured the category "*burakumin*" and consequently altered the criteria for who fits in it. Drawing on a range of ethnographic data and examples, this presentation problematizes the category of "*burakumin*" and documents how both the identification and identity of those labeled with this term have shifted within Japanese history along with the evolving institutions, ideologies, and practices used to define the Japanese population and construct the Japanese nation (and its "others"). It will also be argued that the notion of a homogeneous society and culture often pointed to as a general source of friction and marginalization for minorities in Japan has actually played a significant role in combating prejudice against *burakumin*.

Professor John Davis is a socio-cultural anthropologist whose work explores the "social life" of rights by critically analyzing the processes by which transnational discourses and practices of human rights intersect with specific national and cultural contexts to shape everyday life. Prof. Davis's dissertation used ethnographic modes of inquiry to illuminate the cultural politics of human rights in Japan through an exploration of how the *burakumin* minority operationalized the idea of human rights within their movement for social change.

Prof. Davis is currently completing a book manuscript titled "Animating Rights in Japan: The Politics of *Buraku* Liberation". Prof. Davis has two new research projects underway. The first utilizes the case of *burakumin* as an opportunity to reconsider theories of race and minority subjectivity. It is at once an attempt to account for the wide-ranging and often conflicting narratives he encountered in Japan about what it meant to be "*burakumin*" and how his own positionality as an African American in Japan shaped his perspective on the topic. More often than not Prof. Davis became part of the focus of conversations with people as they invoked his status as a *kokujin* ("Black person") to illustrate points of difference or similarity "the nature of the comparison varied with the speaker" between racial minorities and *burakumin*. Prof. Davis's second line of research compares how concepts of race and ethnicity factor into genetics research in Japan and the United States respectively.

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Dulles Hall, Room 12

(230 W. 17th Ave)

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Free and open to the public

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