

**THE PORTRAIT OF AN OUTCASTE ACTOR:
MIKUNI RENTARŌ'S NOVEL
AND COMING OUT AS BURAKUMIN**

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Introduction

Mikuni Rentarō (1923–2013) was one of the most versatile character actors in the history of Japanese cinema. (Mikuni was a stage name; his real name was Satō Masao.) He played in numerous films and garnered many awards following his screen debut. Japanese film directors he worked for read like a who's who of great Japanese filmmakers: included are luminaries such as Kinoshita Keisuke (1912–1998), Naruse Mikio (1905–1969), Ichikawa Kon (1915–2008), Inagaki Hiroshi (1905–1980), Uchida Tomu (1898–1970), Imai Tadashi (1912–1991), Yamamoto Satsuo (1910–1983), Kobayashi Masaki (1916–1996), Imamura Shōhei (1926–2006), Ōshima Nagisa (1932–2013), and Yoshida Kijū (1933–). Mikuni's handsome looks, which lasted into his middle-age years, branded him an alpha male. Three coffee table books of his portraits were published between 1998 and 2010.¹ Mikuni was also exceptional among Japanese actors in that he was extremely articulate. He authored several books on his life and on Japanese Buddhism, and he coauthored discussions with writers and scholars such as Noma Hiroshi (1911–1995), Okiura Kazuteru (1927–), and Yan Sogiru (1936–). He was also an anomaly for a Japanese celebrity in that he came out during the 1970s in regard to his family origin being burakumin (the literal meaning of the word is “people of the hamlet”; it denotes Japanese outcastes) and later wrote and spoke on the subject. With his exceptional curriculum vitae, his passing in April 2013 was big news in Japan, and numerous obituaries appeared. The aspect of his burakumin identity, however, was downplayed in those obituaries. The film journal *Kinema Junpō*'s July 2013 issue, for example, carried ten cover articles on Mikuni the actor and his accomplishments.² Among the ten articles,

¹ See Sawatari Hajime, *Cigar* (Tokyo: Parco, 1998); Ichihara Motoki, *Kao: mikuni rentarō* [Faces of Mikuni Rentarō] (Tokyo: Daisan shokan, 2003); and Shida Ikkō, *Mikuni rentarō no utsuwa* [Mikuni Rentarō: The Vessel] (Tokyo: Futabasha, 2010).

² *Kinema Junpō* 2455 (July 2013): 24–53.

however, only one, by Satō Tadao, makes reference to Mikuni's family origins.³ A book that was published in the same year, journalist Utsunomiya Naoko's memoir of her conversations with Mikuni, does not refer once to his burakumin background.⁴ I see the minimizing of his family origins and the issue of burakumin origins in obituaries for Mikuni as part of an alarming tendency in general that current scholars and authors in Japan working on the burakumin see, namely that the burakumin issue has become absent (*muka*) from the mainstream Japanese media.⁵ This paper, then, counters such a tendency and argues that Mikuni's biography, especially his coming out as and his discourse on buraku, was important for the actor as well as being a significant part of burakumin and minority history in modern Japan.

Mikuni the Film Actor

Mikuni made his first screen appearance in the 1951 film *Good Devil* (*Zenma*), directed by Kinoshita Keisuke. In order to promote their new actor, the Shōchiku film studio publicized their new signee as not only handsome but “a graduate of the engineering department at the University of Osaka, who excels in swimming and judo; [and] won top prizes in varsity swimming.”⁶ Mikuni did practice judo and swimming in middle school, but the rest was a blatant fabrication. He was actually a middle school (in the prewar education system) dropout who ran away from his parents' house when he was 16 years old. Except for the two years he served in the Japanese military, Mikuni worked odd jobs until he was scouted by Shōchiku at the age of 27.

³ Satō Tadao, “Senjō kara kaette kita otoko [A Man Who Returned from the Battleground],” *Kinema junpō* 1641: 31–33.

⁴ Utsunomiya Naoko, *Wakare no nani ga kanashii no desuka, to mikuni rentarō wa itta* [“What Is There to Be Sad about Goodbyes?” said Mikuni Rentarō] (Tokyo: Chuō kōron shinsha, 2013).

⁵ Kurokawa Midori, *Tsukurareta “jinshu”*: *buraku sabetsu to jinshushugi* [Constructed “Ethnicity”: Buraku Discrimination and Racism] (Tokyo: Yūshisha, 2016), 242–52; Uehara Yoshihiro, “Kaisetsu [Afterword],” in Uehara Yoshihiro, ed., *Roji: hisabetsu buraku o meguru bungaku* [The Alleyway: Literature on Buraku] (Tokyo: Kōseiisha, 2017), 257–89.

⁶ Mikuni Rentarō, *Ikizama shinizama: mikuni rentarō* [Mikuni Rentarō's Way of Life] (Tokyo: KK Long Sellers, 2006), 79.

Mikuni's running away from home was related to his burakumin background. His father worked as an electrician, but this was still akin to being a day laborer. Working with electricity was a trade that his father learned while serving in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905-1906. Prior to that, he had worked with Mikuni's grandfather in their family business making caskets for the dead, which was a burakumin profession in Japan.⁷ Although not explicitly told his heritage, Mikuni sensed that something was amiss when he was the first to be suspected at his school when someone's bicycle was stolen.⁸ He also found it strange that his grandparents lived away from others in their home village.⁹ Mikuni reflected that even though he did not want to enter middle school, which was not yet compulsory in pre-World War II Japan, his father beat him into submission to do so: "I reluctantly entered middle school, but a very strange atmosphere pervaded my middle school dorm life. I was already at a self-conscious age and was quite aware of how other students saw me. I was obviously discriminated against at my school. With the school environment as such, I was forced into thinking that I could not stay there."¹⁰ When Mikuni dropped out of middle school in his third year, his father again beat him relentlessly. Unable to tolerate the beatings, he ran away from his family in Izu Peninsula, where he had grown up.

Away from home, Mikuni wandered for a few months in what were then Japanese territories but which are today's People's Republic of China and Korea, after which he settled down in Osaka, where he worked one job after another. He tried to evade military conscription in wartime Japan, but his mother informed the police. He was arrested in 1943 and

⁷ Mikuni, *Ikizama Shinizama*, 46. Other professions in premodern and modern Japan that were largely burakumin-specific included butchering, leather and fur crafting, the making of Japanese musical instruments that use animal skins, and performing arts such as trained monkey performing (*saru mawashi*).

⁸ Mikuni Rentarō, *Shinran ni itaru michi* [My Path to Shinran] (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 2010), 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48–49. In this book, Mikuni offers, in the guise of fiction, his memory of having attended his grandmother's funeral and witnessing his grandfather making a casket and then burying her on his own.; *Ibid.*, 246–251.

immediately sent to the Chinese front, serving there until the end of hostilities in 1945. He again did a lot of job-hopping until he was finally scouted by Koide Takashi, a Shōchiku producer, six years later. Kinoshita Keisuke, who had become a major film director in the immediate postwar years, took a liking to Mikuni and straightaway cast him in three major supporting roles in his films. Among Mikuni's initial successes during the 1950s was playing a main supporting character in *Samurai I: Miyamoto Musashi* (Miyamoto Musashi, dir. Inagaki Hiroshi, 1954), and also in *Burmese Harp* (Biruma no tategoto, dir. Ichikawa Kon, 1956). He then started appearing in the films of Independent Production (*dokuritsu puro*), an entity set up by communist directors including Imai Tadashi, Yamamoto Satsuo, and Ieki Miyoji (1911–1976), who had been purged by major film studios in the early 1950s for their political activism. The two renowned Independent Production films in which Mikuni appeared were *Half Brothers* (Ibo kyōdai, dir. Ieki Miyoji, 1957) and *Songs of a Handcart* (Niguruma no uta, dir. Yamamoto Satsuo, 1959).

When these directors resumed their careers at larger film studios in the 1960s, they continued to cast Mikuni in their films. Among Mikuni's major films of that time was *A Fugitive from the Past* (Kiga kaikyō, dir. Uchida Tomu, 1964). The 1960s also saw him make an appearance in *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (Kamigami no fukaki yokubō, 1968), an epic film directed by Imamura Shōhei and set on an Okinawan island. Mikuni later appeared in another Imamura classic, *Vengeance Is Mine* (Fukushū suru wa ware ni ari, 1979). He also worked with film auteur Yoshida Kijū, playing main characters in films such as *Coup d'Etat* (Kaigenrei, 1973) and *A Promise* (Ningen no yakusoku, 1988).



Figure 1. Mikuni putting on makeup for his Gerald O'Hara role in *Gone with the Wind*, 1974

While building up his career as a renowned film actor, Mikuni started to write and talk on burakumin issues after confessing his burakumin background in the late 1970s. From the 1980s into the 1990s, Mikuni came to write about and discuss two main points concerning the burakumin and Japanese culture; one was an understanding that the premodern forebears of the burakumin, the *eta*, *hinin*, or *kawaramono*, played a major role in creating Japanese culture, especially the performing arts. He argued that it was essentially the outcastes who created and developed Japanese theater arts such as *noh*, *bunraku*, and *kabuki* that are still performed today, and that the actor's profession was a modern rendering of what his burakumin ancestors had created and perfected. Mikuni's view was based on historical and anthropological findings by scholars such as Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) and Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953), and also by Mikuni's contemporaries such as Amino Yoshihiko (1928–2004), Morooka Sukeyuki (1928–2006), and Okiura Kazuteru. Mikuni, together with others, argued that the Tokugawa shogunate (which ruled Japan from 1603 to 1868) had disciplined and regulated burakumin to an unprecedented degree, and this dampened the cultural creativity that the outcastes exercised during Japan's medieval period, creativity that culminated in performance arts such as *noh* and *bunraku* plays. During the Tokugawa era, nevertheless, *kawaramono* continued to develop performance arts and founded *kabuki*.

The second issue in Mikuni's writings is on the teachings and practices of the medieval Buddhist monk Shinran (1173–1262), who founded the Jōdo Shinshū (New Pure Land) sect of Japanese Buddhism. Shinran became renowned as a priest who himself married and broke the Buddhist law of celibacy. He also reasoned that laypeople who live on diets of fish and meat can also achieve enlightenment and salvation. Mikuni, relying on the writings of Noma Hiroshi and others, argued that medieval priests such as Shinran were thus able to break out of earlier teachings of Buddhism that served only the elite: the imperial family and the aristocrats. Shinran, among others, subverted earlier Buddhism by providing a theoretical and practical basis for the salvation and inclusion of the non-elite, including the burakumin. Mikuni's thoughts on Shinran culminated in his historical novel *Shinran: Path to Purity* (Shinran: shiroi michi), which he published in 1982. He later wrote a screenplay based on his novel and directed a feature film of the same title based on it in 1987. The film won the jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival that year.

Despite the disappearance of the buraku issue from the Japanese mainstream media, there has been active academic research on the

burakumin in the English language scholarship. Monographs on modern histories of the burakumin have appeared consistently.¹¹ Several in-depth anthropological studies on the issue have also been published.¹² There are also multiple studies on Nakagami Kenji (1946–1992), a major burakumin author of fiction.¹³ This article builds on those recent studies and looks at Mikuni’s critique of burakumin discrimination. While Mikuni’s origin has been publicized in the past, even burakumin studies in Japan have so far paid scant attention to Mikuni’s accomplishments in cinema and his publications.¹⁴ There are many entry points to Mikuni’s performances and

¹¹ Among them are Ian Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan: The Career of Matsumoto Jiichirō* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Jeffrey Paul Bayliss, *On the Margins of Empire: Buraku and Korean Identity in Prewar and Wartime Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013); and Noah Y. McCormack, *Japan’s Outcaste Abolition: The Struggle for National Inclusion and the Making of the Modern State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹² Among them are Timothy D. Amos, *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011); Flavia Cangià, *Performing the Buraku: Narratives on Cultures and Everyday Life in Contemporary Japan* (Zurich, Switzerland: LIT Verlag, 2013); Joseph D. Hankins, *Working Skin: Making Leather, Making a Multicultural Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014); Christopher Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self: Negotiations of Buraku Identity in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).

¹³ There have been other burakumin authors, such as Hijikata Tetsu (1927–2005), but among the authors of fiction who have come out as burakumin, Nakagami remains the most prominent. Among the English-language Nakagami studies are Nina Cornyetz, *Dangerous Women, Deadly Words: Phallic Fantasy and Modernity in Three Japanese Writers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Eve Zimmerman, *Out of the Alleyway: Nakagami Kenji and the Poetics of Outcaste Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007); Anne McKnight, *Nakagami, Japan: Buraku and the Writing of Ethnicity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Kurokawa Midori made the only reference in existing buraku studies to Mikuni’s biography; this in the endnotes of her *Egakareta hisabetsu*

writings in connection to the issue of the burakumin, but I will focus in this paper on two aspects: that he published a novel in 1957 titled *The Portrait of Rie* (Rie no shōzō), and that he came out as burakumin in the 1970s. Read with today's knowledge of Mikuni as a person with burakumin origins, the novel carries marked aspects of his concealed identity as well as antecedents of ideas that Mikuni develops later in his writings.

The 1957 Novel

Mikuni was a middle school dropout, but he became an autodidact who read avidly on his own. He was known as an actor who read screenplays and plays extremely thoroughly. He also read other books and resources in order to interpret the characters he played.¹⁵ In his later years, he never agreed to play a role in a film unless he had read the script first. Even after shooting started, Mikuni frequently argued with the director and other actors as to what was the better interpretation of their roles.¹⁶ It was his reading as such that eventually paved the way for his own writing, which he carried out actively since the 1980s. The novel *The Portrait of Rie* was something of an anomaly, in that it was his very first publication and appeared in 1957. The writing and publication of the book was carried out almost two decades prior to his coming out as a burakumin, and it does not offer any explicit referencing of the burakumin issue. Buraku had already become a serious social issue in Japan by the late 1950s, however, and Mikuni's novel possesses interesting aspects that show the author's awareness of that issue.

Mikuni was in a strange position in the years 1956–1957 in that he became the first actor to violate the Five Company Agreement (gosha kyōtei, 1953–1971). The agreement was put in place during the heyday of Japanese cinema; it dictated that an actor had the legal right to appear only in films made at her or his studio unless permitted otherwise. His violation

buraku: eiga no naka no jigazō to tashazō [Buraku Represented: Self-Representations and Representations by Others of Buraku in Japanese Cinema] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2011), 68–70.

¹⁵ Watanabe Eriko, “Tokushuna kōsen [A Special Light],” in Mikuni Rentaro and Yan Sogil, eds., *Fūkyō ni ikiru* [Eccentric Living] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1999), 139–42.

¹⁶ Sano Shinichi, *Kaiyūden: mikuni rentarō, shinu made enji tsuzukeru koto* [Biography of an Eccentric Actor: Acting until the Very End] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2011), 42–43.

of the agreement made him infamous as a rebel actor in Japanese cinema and left him unable to work, albeit very briefly. Mikuni had been appearing in numerous films until then: twelve in 1953, five in 1954, ten in 1955, and five in 1956. In 1957, the figure was reduced to three, a number that includes *Half Brothers*, Mikuni's first work for Independent Production, a studio company that operated outside the Agreement. Together with his work for Independent Production, he was able to negotiate a new contract with Tōei in 1958 that also allowed him to work for other companies. The number of his films immediately jumped back to six that year. The year 1957 is thus exceptional in that Mikuni's screen appearances that year were limited, as this was the time in Mikuni's life in which he opted to write his novel instead.

The one and only edition of Mikuni's novel carries ten black-and-white portraits of Mikuni the actor that are inserted towards the end of the book.¹⁷ The portraits were shot by photographer Yamamoto Zennosuke (1931–2001), demonstrating that already in his early thirties, Mikuni was considered a photogenic actor. Yamamoto describes Mikuni as a “star (*sutā*)” in his comments on his pictures of Mikuni, and the actor was a well-known celebrity in 1957.¹⁸ The ten portraits include three pictures of Mikuni preparing for a stage play, two pictures working on the film *Half Brothers*, three pictures spending time in Tokyo, and two pictures at his home, one with a young woman, presumably his wife at the time. The pictures are relatively unremarkable pictures of Mikuni the celebrity, at work and offstage.

What is remarkable, however, is a discrepancy between the ten pictures and the content of the novel, the latter depicting a strange relationship between a painter husband and a fashion model wife. Most of the other main characters in the novel are professional actors, but there is

¹⁷ Mikuni Rentarō, *Rie no shozō* [The Portrait of Rie] (Tokyo: Moriwaki bunko, 1957), 1–10.

¹⁸ Yamamoto Zennosuke shot his Mikuni portraits in 1956, when Mikuni was appearing in the film *Half Brothers*. Yamamoto exhibited his portraits as “120 Days with Mikuni Rentarō,” and the exhibit made the rounds of six major Japanese cities in 1957. For Yamamoto's comments on his series, see “Yamamoto Yoshinosuke Photo Work Collection,” Blog.Goo, October 11, 2011 (accessed August 1, 2018 <http://blog.goo.ne.jp/zenyam/e/d693628b6a04db815169e63fe2d33192>).

also some ambiguity as to how those characters or the story itself relate to Mikuni. The novel opens up one foggy night in downtown Tokyo. Mitani Yūji, a film actor (the family name Mitani in Chinese characters is 三谷, so name-wise Yūji is an alter ego of Mikuni 三國, the author), encounters and befriends a painter named Ōgami Ryūji.¹⁹ Mitani accompanies Ōgami to the latter's studio apartment, where he is shown a beautiful portrait of Ōgami's wife, Rie. From that point onward, Ōgami takes over as the main narrator who tells his story.

Ōgami tells Mitani that although still not divorced, he currently lives separately from his wife because she had an adulterous relationship with his older brother Yamagiwa Kōzō, a celebrity actor and theater director. Ōgami actually witnessed the two having an affair at Yamagiwa's mansion. The name Kōzō in Chinese characters is 浩三, which again includes the number three; he is thus another double for Mikuni. The multiple alter egos would have been unsurprising to Japanese readers, who are used to the Japanese *shishōsetsu* subgenre of fiction (autobiographical novels; I-novels). Most likely unfathomable for them, however, would have been how to connect the story to Mikuni, a celebrity film actor. Yamamoto's portraits of Mikuni in the book are furnished with headings such as "Desolation," "Lies and Truth," "Between Acts," "In Darkness," and "Clown without Pathos," so the pictures themselves would have enhanced the notion of Mikuni as a brooding, contemplative actor/performer.²⁰ Mikuni's false label as a University of Osaka alum would have been strengthened by the pictures and his introspective novel.

In the novel itself, Ōgami further discloses to Mitani that Rie had an incestuous relationship with her father during wartime when she was 21, her first sexual experience. From here, the theme of incest, more than that of adultery, takes over as the main theme of this novel, it being also a connecting thread between Ōgami and his wife Rie. Rie's now deceased father, despite being a Buddhist priest, was a serious womanizer, once discovered by his wife, Rie's mother, to be lying in a futon with another woman. Rie's aunt, sister of her now also deceased mother, tells Rie that the father tried to sleep with her too. Ōgami's side of the family is also

¹⁹ The similarity of the two names, Yūji and Ryūji, also implies that the two characters are something of doppelgängers that are connected to the author of the novel.

²⁰ Mikuni, *Rie no shozō*, 1–3, 6, 9.

marked by an incestuous disposition; Ōgami and Yamagiwa's younger sister Miho, an actress from whom he first hears about Rie's incestuous relationship with her father, tells Ōgami that Yamagiwa tried to seduce her too. Yamagiwa's wish was unconsummated as Miho immediately ran away from him, but her disclosure makes Ōgami reflect:

“(On hearing my brother trying to seduce my sister) I became more scared instead of angry or hating my brother. This is terrible, I thought: I carry in my veins the same blood as my older brother...But even more terrible was as regards Rie, as she slept with her own father, her biological father. This is daunting as she would have been already 21 years of age then and had proper schooling at that: she would have known the rights and wrongs. She described to me her sleeping with her father, however, as giving her a sense akin to the unity of heaven and earth; the unity of heaven and earth!”... Ōgami said that he feels his brother and Rie sleeping together can be reduced to the issue of their blood. He made references to Émile Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* series and argued that Nana can only spring from a blood that is not pure.”²¹

To Ōgami's claim, Mitani wonders: “What does Ōgami mean by blood? Why does he seek answers by distinguishing one kind of blood from another?”²² Here, the curious aspect of this novel is that it is not a straightforward condemnation of incest or of breaking taboos. Rie is a beautiful woman, and the numerous portraits of her drawn by Ōgami are beautiful objects of art. While Ōgami hears of his wife's relationship with her father only from his sister Miho and later Rie, he actually witnesses an encounter between Rie and his brother through a window of Yamagiwa's mansion. The extraordinary aspect of his experience is that rather than being shocked by witnessing such a scene, Ōgami is enchanted and entranced by observing Rie's naked body as she has sex:

²¹ Ibid., 20–21. Nana is a prostitute protagonist in the 1879 Zola novel of that title.

²² Ibid., 21.

Rie seemed (to Ōgami) that her object of focus was not just Yamagiwa, with whom she was having sex. It looked as though she was crafting on her own the elations of life. Her body was making a movement that was akin to a confident music performance; carried out by an individual who has never known defeat. He felt as though in Rie's figure, he was witnessing a goddess of infatuation. Rie was magnificent. Her sweating body that was indulging in sex was stunningly beautiful and alive.²³

Ōgami describes Rie's body while having sex as an ideal beauty, even as another part of him tries to infer it as a direct manifestation of her having inherited dissolute, debauched blood from her father. While marking how sinful human beings are, Ōgami at the same time could not help but become entranced by the beauty of Rie when she is having sex and later composed at their home. Ōgami took part in battles during World War II, and coming back to peacetime Japan, he found that untruths had been spewed and had become universal back home. He could not stand such lies. Rie's body and its beauty marked a truth that stood in contrast to the falsehoods that otherwise surrounded Ōgami in everyday life.²⁴ With Rie's profession as a fashion model, Yamagiwa's as an actor and stage director, and Ōgami's as a painter, Ōgami's view from the garden is as a voyeur, and one can see that the gazing relationship in the novel mimics performance art onstage or a film audience in the darkness of a theater.

Thus, the novel foregrounds not only incest but also performance and film arts, and the debauchery that signifies human truths providing the basis for the latter. The fact that Ōgami is a professional painter (albeit an unsuccessful one) who can later represent the beauty of Rie's "performance" in his artwork marks the significance of his gaze toward her; of him watching and her performing, and the centrality that such intertwining occupies in art and human lives. Sano Shinichi, who interviewed Mikuni in regard to his prominent film appearances, reminiscences after Mikuni's death that acting for him was not just Mikuni playing a role but Satō Masao (Mikuni's real name) performing "Mikuni," and this "Mikuni" playing a role in film or onstage on top of that. Sano finds such multiple layers of

²³ Ibid., 36.

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

reality and falsehood to have been very much at the basis of the late actor's professional career.²⁵ With that, the ten photographs by Yamamoto that accompany the novel can be interpreted as "Mikuni" posing in work and in everyday life. Mikuni had not yet come out as a burakumin at that point in 1957, so a discrepancy between Satō Masao, a burakumin-identified individual, and Mikuni the celebrity would have been starker for the actor.

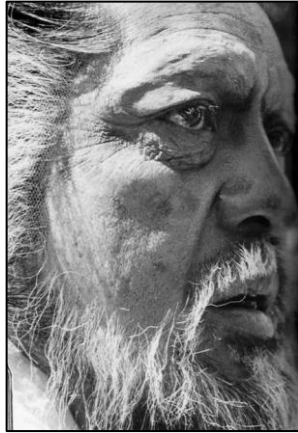


Figure 2. Mikuni performing the role of Meiji activist Tanaka Shōzō in *Ragged Flag* (*Ranru no hata*, dir. Yoshimura imisaburō, 1974)

When confronted later by Ōgami about her affair with Yamagiwa, however, Rie flatly denies that it had taken place and says he must have been delusional. She says that Ōgami is the only person whom she loves. After witnessing her affair, however, he becomes further exhilarated by Rie's facial features and body, once observing her waiting for him through binoculars from afar: "What strange allure her eyes impart. Their colors carry unfathomable tensions. How could such lights exist for real?"²⁶ Her figure began to attract and to repel Ōgami even more after the affair, and he could not stop painting her on canvasses. Ōgami's observer status becomes

²⁵ Sano Shinichi, "Satō masao mo ita ['Satō Masao' Was Also There]," *Kinema junpō* 1641: 34–37.

²⁶ Mikuni, *Rie no shozō*, 81.

even more pronounced by his sexual impotence and emasculation; he did not have a thorough, satisfying sex life with Rie, a matter that is disclosed in the later part of the novel.²⁷ This further distances Ōgami and Rie physically. Ōgami's impotent self becomes even further conflated with his gaze alone, a person who observes and crafts artworks but who is unable to participate in life itself. After coming out as burakumin, Mikuni makes numerous attempts to interpret the burakumin and their community in Japanese history as a hotbed of cultural production. Ōgami, an alienated painter, is an antecedent of Mikuni's burakumin/performers that the author later finds as subjects of history.

The novel and its protagonist, moreover, try further to contemplate Rie's incest and adultery. Later in the novel, an unnamed middle-aged American military man, a self-proclaimed Yale graduate and likely homosexual (he leaves with his arm around the shoulders of a male prostitute), appears in the story, who similarly finds beauty in Ōgami's paintings of his wife. When Ōgami shares her secrets with the American, the latter describes Rie's state of affairs as that, which forgoes the spirit (*seishin*), or god (*kami*). He sees it, as close to an evil that is the original sin (*genzai aku*) in humans. The American tells Ōgami, nevertheless, that it is the struggle between the spirit and the evil that constitutes in-depth human culture:

But the people who remain uninterested in culture as such, and hence our true selves, abound in this world. Most of us deceive ourselves into identifying with ethics, laws, and customs that have been built by a handful of elite, the powerful, and the invaders; that such ethics are an absolute. What human beings really need to desire and to look for are things that are virtually hidden at the bottom of the lake, the lake that is our everyday lives. What we need to seek out and experience, through wandering, is an anarchical state of one's spirit and body. The eyes of that woman attest to her having seen anarchy... [Rie's actions, which include being incestuous and adulterous] clearly

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 86–87. They do have sex once, but Ōgami does not find her alluring and alive then as she was when she was having sex with Yamagiwa. *Ibid.*, 129–30.

deviate from ethics and norms. There is, however, blind acceptance or obedience to morals and ethics that flatly denies raw, human nature, even when such morals are mere constructs. Her actions, in contrast, can become a superior culture when they are eventually tempered by rationality and spirit.²⁸

Another significant point is that this novel interprets Rie and Yamagiwa's transgressions as embodiments of the human state of helplessness and malignancy that is universal. An unflinching gaze at such a state, moreover, provides an impetus toward religious and spiritual transcendence, which Mikuni, in his post-coming out years, began developing through his understanding of Shinran and Shinran's strand of Buddhism. Mikuni renders Rie's name in Chinese characters as 理慧 in his novel: the first character denotes "reason" or "rationality," while the second character denotes "wisdom" but most pertinently also "Buddhist enlightenment." Rie and her Buddhist priest father, then, are germane figures who are preparing themselves for salvation in the Buddhist sense. If the novel is to be read as a *shishōsetsu*, Rie and her father are also the doubles of the author in a deeper connotation.²⁹ Rie and the novel itself can also be read as an allegory of humanity in general: corrupted but also potentially transcendental. Mikuni saw the most significant achievement of Shinran's teachings as having promised salvation to the poor and the oppressed; they do not distinguish believers by their social standings. Mikuni argues that while Buddhism in general strengthened class divisions and discriminations with the conceptions of destiny and "karma" (*gō*), medieval Buddhists such as Shinran and Nichiren (1222–1282) subverted and nullified such conceptions.³⁰

Unable to bear the tension between his own senses of attraction and animosity toward Rie, Ōgami opts to move out of their apartment. He is,

²⁸ Ibid., 114–16.

²⁹ Mikuni later played incestuous characters, landmarks in his acting career, in two films directed by Imamura Shōhei. He played a father who, after sleeping with his daughter, is chained up and eventually murdered by other villagers in Imamura's film *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (1968). He also played the role of a man who lusts toward the wife of his son but who stops at the last minute in *Vengeance Is Mine* (1979).

³⁰ Mikuni, *Ikizama shinizama*, 94–97.

nevertheless, obsessed with Rie, continuously thinking about her and trying to portray her on his canvasses. Perhaps things like reason and rationality were beyond her reach, he ponders: she might be akin to a primitive person (*genshijin*). What agency does she carry as an individual after all? “Blood is something that we cannot do something about. The individuals are not responsible. It is either to accept that or to reject it, in which case we become extinct.”³¹ Ōgami later visits a small town near Okayama, Rie’s father’s hometown, in order to find out the secrets of Rie’s blood; a section that markedly connects Rie’s behavior and the issue of her blood to the issue of the burakumin.³² However, he finds nothing in Okayama that explains the actions of Rie and her father. The novel ends by showing that four years after Ōgami moved away, Rie continues to visit the impoverished artist to take care of him and to discuss their reuniting.

As buraku studies attest, the burakumin have been discriminated against for many centuries, with many people seeing them as constituting an ethnicity that is different from the majority Japanese. Such a racial distinction has been disputed, and it is at present commonly recognized that they are part of the majority Japanese. Historian Kida Sadakichi (1871–1939), for example, as early as 1919, refuted the notion that the burakumin constitute an ethnicity that is different from mainstream Japanese.³³ Despite that, the prejudice that they belong to another, inferior ethnicity has persisted as a rationale for discriminating against them. Eight years after Mikuni’s novel was published, the Buraku Liberation League (Buraku kaihō dōmei, henceforward BLL; the largest Japanese buraku organization) in 1965 had to confirm in its report that “there was no evidence of a different racial origin” as regards the burakumin.³⁴ Because of that,

³¹ Mikuni, *Rie no shozō*, 134.

³² Ibid., 162. Some Japanese villages and areas were recognized as burakumin communities as a whole. In 1975, *The Complete List of Burakumin Areas* (Buraku chimei sōkan), a list of burakumin communities and areas, was edited and marketed illegally to companies. As many as 240 companies are said to have purchased the list in order to avoid employing burakumin. Kurokawa Midori, *Kindai burakushi: meiji kara gendai made* [Modern History of Buraku: From Meiji to the Present] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2011), 235–36.

³³ Ibid., 112–14.

³⁴ Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 228.

throughout Japan's modern history, from the Meiji era (1868–1912) to the present, the matter of marriage has frequently remained an issue. Marriages between burakumin and non-burakumin individuals have often been opposed and obstructed by the non-burakumin families.³⁵

When Mikuni's novel appeared in 1957, buraku had already become an issue in Japanese popular culture. Cinema-wise, the first film version of Shimazaki Tōson's *Broken Commandment* (*Hakai*, dir. Kinoshita Kesuke) appeared in 1948, as part of the burgeoning democratization of Japan that took place after 1945.³⁶ Both the original novel of 1906 by Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943) and its first film version depict the internal and external struggles of a young elementary school teacher, Ushimatsu, who carries a burakumin origin, and his eventual coming out as such in front of his pupils. The 1948 film was directed by none other than Kinoshita, who had discovered Mikuni in 1951 and helped him begin his career in cinema. When the Tōson novel was again made into a film, this time directed by Ichikawa Kon in 1962, Mikuni played the role of a burakumin legislator, Inoko Rentarō, a mentor figure of the protagonist Ushimatsu. Tōson's 1906 novel, however, still carries numerous shortcomings that include using the above understanding that the burakumin constitute an ethnicity that is different and distinctive from the majority Japanese.³⁷

Encouraged by the democratization that took place in Japan after World War II ended in 1945, buraku activism also came to be further empowered. The Buraku Liberation National Committee (henceforward BLNC; Buraku kaihō zenkoku iinkai) was set up immediately after the war in 1946. The BLNC evolved into the BLL with mass activism (*taishū undō*) as its main objective. With this, the 1950s can be described as a decade

³⁵ A recent Japanese documentary, *Aru seinikuten no hanashi* [Tale of a Butcher Shop], dir. Hanamura Aya (2013), depicts a butcher shop family in Osaka, a family that carries a burakumin background. The director interviews a young son of the family and his non-burakumin wife, whom he marries in the course of the film, whether they have experienced opposition to their marriage. They answer in the negative.

³⁶ Kurokawa, *Egakareta hisabetsu buraku*, 27–37.

³⁷ According to Kurokawa Midori, this was also the view of the Japanese government as they sought to improve the living conditions of the burakumin in the early twentieth century. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

during which the first postwar mass buraku activism commenced.³⁸ Among the common prejudices that the BLL and other buraku groups tried to dispel at the time was the general understanding that the burakumin carry a genetic problem. This was because the burakumin were thought to have been marrying only those in their own community, due to discrimination. In reality, this was not the case, as burakumin communities existed all over Japan and intermarriage between different buraku communities frequently took place. A frequently shared misconception, then, was that problems regarding the burakumin and their communities existed because of the problems of their blood and inferior kinship.³⁹

The burakumin and their communities countered such prejudices by carrying out anti-discrimination education in schools (*dōwa kyōiku*), which became an important objective for buraku organizations after 1945. Among the seminal events that involved burakumin, activism during the 1950s was the *All Romance* incident. The tabloid magazine *All Romance* carried in its October 1951 issue a short story titled “Special Buraku: An Exposé” (Bakuro shōsetsu: tokushu buraku). The work was written by Sugiyama Seiichi, who worked for the City of Kyoto. Sugiyama’s fiction mainly featured Koreans, but their place of residence in Kyoto was categorized as a “buraku,” and his main characters and their settings were considered to be extending existing stereotypes of the buraku community and its residents. His story was thus condemned by buraku activists on two fronts; one was the negative depictions of the buraku community, and the second was that a local government worker had written and published it.⁴⁰ Despite such a negative reaction toward Sugiyama’s story, there emerged a stronger interest in novels that addressed the issue of the burakumin, a trend that pervaded the 1950s. Noma Hiroshi and Matsumoto Seichō (1909–

³⁸ Kurokawa, *Kindai burakushi*, 192–93, 212.

³⁹ Kurokawa Midori, *Tsukuri kaerareru shirushi: nihon kindai, hisabetsu buraku, mainoritii* [Transforming Signs: Modern Japan, Buraku, and Minorities] (Osaka: Kaihō shuppansha, 2004), 199–200.

⁴⁰ Kurokawa, *Kindai burakushi*, 206–8. “Special Buraku: An Exposé” has been reprinted in Uehara, “Kaisetsu,” 221–56. Uehara writes that there was a reappraisal many years later holding that the BLL had overreacted in 1951 and that Sugiyama’s novel was not quite as negative a portrayal of the buraku as it had been accused of being. *Ibid.*, 292. I agree with this reappraisal.

1992), who were major authors of fiction in postwar Japan, describe such a tendency in their roundtable talk of 1959 as an ongoing “buraku boom” in fiction.⁴¹ Possibly encouraged by such a boom, Sumii Sue (1902–1995) started her research on the issue in 1958 and began serializing her epic burakumin novel *River without a Bridge* (*Hashi no nai kawa*) in the following year.⁴²

These are, then, possible backdrops to *The Portrait of Rie* when one considers the yet closeted but burakumin-identified Mikuni. With this in mind, one can assume that with the foregrounding of the notion of blood, Mikuni’s novel can be regarded as having been an antecedent to the works of later burakumin authors such as Nakagami Kenji, who came to regard the issue of blood as central to his fiction writings. This is understandably so, when in reality, the physical appearance of the burakumin could not be distinguished from that of the majority Japanese. Nakagami brings that point up in his 1985 discussion with another author of fiction, Murakami Haruki (1949–). Nakagami comments: “I can feel another difference between [your works and mine]....Blood, in other words. I think that the difference is whether you keep these absolute ties in mind or cut yourself off from them completely...My work resembles *shishōsetsu*, but it is different from any other *shishōsetsu* ever written. Most *shishōsetsu* wash away the absolute ties of blood.”⁴³

From this, Eve Zimmerman argues that for Nakagami, the “absolute ties of blood” were “indispensable” to his writing. Zimmerman, moreover, writes that the issue of incest was an issue that Nakagami constantly foregrounded in his early works of fiction that appeared during the 1970s. She cites Hillis Miller, who analyzes the works of William Faulkner, who also wrote on incest that, “incest corresponds to constative

⁴¹ Uehara, “Kaisetsu,” 38, 50. Uehara also writes that the 1950s “buraku boom” ended up as an anomaly in regards to fiction in Japan. He argues that a neglect of the burakumin issue in Japanese fiction, which was the case prior to the 1950s, resumed after that decade, and that this still maintains today. *Ibid.*, 257–89.

⁴² Hōjō Tsunehisa, *Hashi no nai kawa: sumii sue no shōgai* [River without a Bridge: The Life of Sumii Sue] (Tokyo, Fūtōsha, 2003), 119–120, 146–147. Sumii Sue, *My Life: Living, Loving, and Fighting* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, the University of Michigan, 2001), 75.

⁴³ Zimmerman, *Out of the Alleyway*, 101.

narration – the telling and retelling of past events, the inability to live in the present, the obsession with repeating a single pattern.”⁴⁴ At the same time, it carries within its scope a critique of the system of patriarchy that was at the center of both the American south as regards Faulkner novels and the burakumin community of Shingū, in the case of Nakagami.⁴⁵

Mikuni’s foregrounding of incest with Rie, her father, and Yamagiwa in the 1957 novel, then, possibly mirrored the author’s own obsession with lineage and blood; something that must have plagued Mikuni prior to his coming out as burakumin.⁴⁶ He sees it as the basis of a shortcoming on the part of the heroine and other characters in the story, and if that is the only way his fiction represents heredity, then it is certainly problematic. If so, that means that Mikuni interiorized a prejudice toward the burakumin and their blood, a notion that has been shared by the majority Japanese for centuries. As Nakagami later proved, however, incest and the issue of blood can also be employed in order to make a critique of the discrimination against the burakumin. What is notable in Mikuni’s fiction is that vice is not attributed to the heroine and her father alone, but also to Yamagiwa, her husband’s kin. The vice is thus shown as a kind of general malaise that afflicts people in general. Neither Rie’s family nor her husband Ōgami’s family is necessarily burakumin. Thus, the fiction does not conflate the issues of blood and burakumin heritage.

The novel, moreover, takes a step further by identifying Rie’s vice (incest and adultery) as the basis of the beauty of her eyes and her body. Her body was never before as beautiful and transcending for Ōgami than at the moment she was having sex with Yamagiwa. Under the guise of an American military man in the novel, Mikuni argues that encompassing such vice as a part of true human nature is what constitutes an insight into the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁶ Mikuni writes, that his mother might have been pregnant when she met his father for the first time. He also claims that he witnessed, when he was a child, a man in a suit seeking his custody. His mother was not a burakumin, so that means Mikuni might not be a biological son of his burakumin father. Mikuni also writes, nevertheless, that he identified far more with his father than with his mother despite the former’s corporal punishments. This is likely to have been one basis on which he became burakumin-identified later in his life. Mikuni, *Ikizama shinizama*, 167–168, 171.

truth. Moreover, comprising such truth is essential for an in-depth culture that includes religion and the performing arts. An unflinching gaze on human evil and fallibility, argues the novel, is a firm basis on which authentic religion and art become possible. This was a view that Mikuni further developed in the 1970s, after his coming out as a burakumin, and he forged a further affinity between himself, his family origins, his performance art, and the Buddhist teachings of Shinran.

Coming Out as Burakumin in the 1970s

Mikuni's coming out took place in the 1970s, through an interview in either the magazine *Weekly Asahi* (Shūkan Asahi) or *Asahi Journal*, with journalist Senbon Kenichirō (1935–).⁴⁷ Christopher Bondy writes that coming out as a minority, to share one's identity as a minority, is largely selective and contextual: "The strategy of selective sharing is an active process that is dependent on both individual agency in recognizing the level of relationship and an understanding of what it means to be a minority in that particular setting, be it a gay man in the United States or a burakumin youth in Japan."⁴⁸ What kind of individual agency and general setting, then, did Mikuni carry when he came out as a burakumin-identified individual during the 1970s?



Figure 3. Mikuni while shooting his incomplete film, *The River without Shores*, 1972

⁴⁷ Mikuni, *Ikizama shinizama*, 26, 89.

⁴⁸ Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self*, 151.

It was a phase in his life in which Mikuni became confused about his priorities. In 1972, he divorced his wife and took off with an eight-member crew to direct and shoot a film that he tentatively titled *River without Shores* (Kishi no nai kawa) in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. He envisioned his film as a kind of semi-documentary about an individual who, after accidentally killing his own son, wanders the desert on a donkey and ends up with a bird burial, in which birds consume his remains. Mikuni and his crew had spent fifty days altogether shooting in West Asia, but he was ultimately unable to finish editing and complete his film.

While he had been unable to finish it, the project had been enlightening for Mikuni in that he was able to carry out further soul-searching until it dawned on him that “human beings were akin to specks of sand in the whole of nature.”⁴⁹ During the shooting in India, Mikuni encountered numerous pilgrims who reminded him of the power of religion. He began reading books on Buddhism after returning to Japan, among them Noma Hiroshi’s work on Shinran, which had just come out in 1973. Mikuni identified as a burakumin, and also started to channel his research into seeking resources for his own film on Shinran.

As discussed earlier, Ōgami’s voyeur role, in part, glorifies the role of the peripheral observer. Based on the studies by writers, historians, and anthropologists such as Noma, Amino, Morooka, and Okiura, Mikuni proclaims that the ancestors of the burakumin, such as the *eta*, *hinin*, and *kawaramono*, traveling entertainers, and puppet performers in the medieval era, played a central role in the formation of the arts in premodern Japan. Shinran himself was not a burakumin, but his connections with the rural poor that included the burakumin enabled him to rewrite Japanese Buddhism, argues Mikuni.⁵⁰ While earlier Buddhism helped to distinguish and brand social classes and essentially served the elite, Shinran expanded the notion of the Pure Land (Buddhist heaven) and argued that regardless of family origins, heredity, or training, anyone is capable of reaching it by repeating holy sutras.⁵¹

Burakumin activism has also evolved since Mikuni’s novel was published in 1957. According to Anne McKnight, the author Nakagami

⁴⁹ Mikuni, *Ikizama shinizama*, 127.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 92–95.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 96–97.

Kenji also came out as a burakumin in an interview in 1981.⁵² This was four years after Nakagami had described, in the third person, his own experiences as a burakumin at a roundtable on discrimination that took place in 1977, which also included Noma Hiroshi and Yasuoka Shotarō (1920–2013). The discussion was originally organized and published by *Asahi Journal* that year.⁵³ McKnight writes that what is noticeable about the decade of the 1970s is “the striking prominence of the theme of confession and *buraku* identity in 1970s fiction.”⁵⁴ Moreover, she sees 1977 as a “landmark year for activists conscious of how language, power, and buraku identity were related in postwar life.” This took place as, “[u]rged on by Noma, the movement activists were beginning to turn their attention to regulating elements of culture that they felt injurious to the buraku cause.”⁵⁵

Fostering this cultural turn on the part of buraku activists of the 1970s was the changing material circumstances of buraku communities at the time. With the high development phase of the Japanese economy and the Marxist view foregrounding the betterment of the economic state of the buraku communities firmly in place, the so-called assimilation projects (*dōwa taisaku jigyō*) and policies that goaded national and local government budgets into rebuilding buraku communities came to be established. The conservative Liberal Democratic Party (henceforward LDP), with such a vision in mind, established the non-Marxist All Japan Dowa Association (henceforward AJDA, *Zen nihon dōwa kai*) in 1960.⁵⁶ The projects as such came to be envisioned and planned by various

⁵² McKnight, *Nakagami, Japan*, 70.

⁵³ Their discussion is included in Noma Hiroshi and Yasuoka Shotarō, eds., *Sabetsu: sono kongen o tou, jōkan* [Questioning the Origins of Discriminations Vol. 1] (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 1984), 174–212.

⁵⁴ McKnight, *Nakagami, Japan*, 71.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁶ Kurokawa, *Kindai burakushi*, 227. Ian Neary also writes, “[AJDA] had overt links with the LDP and sought to provide burakumin with an alternative to supporting the left-wing parties, but in many ways its analysis of the buraku problem was not dissimilar to that of the BLL. [AJDA] too saw discrimination linked to poverty in a vicious cycle and thought that a comprehensive set of government-funded policies was needed to enable buraku communities to break out of this cycle.” Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 227.

government offices and buraku activists during the 1960s and eventually took off in the mid-1970s; they continued until 2002. The projects changed the appearances of burakumin communities quite thoroughly. Simultaneously, they functioned as a wedge between buraku activism and Marxism. The activists such as those in the BLL supported those projects, and that meant that the buraku activists, who in immediate postwar Japan identified solely with Marxism, began to distance themselves from non-burakumin Marxists. Embodying this in part is the split between the BLL and its Japan Communist Party (henceforward JCP) critics that became marked in 1965: the two split entirely in 1970.⁵⁷ With this, identity politics came to supersede Marxist politics in buraku activism.⁵⁸

According to Kurokawa: “[e]arlier on, burakumin discrimination was said to signify the lecherous living standard of the communities themselves. An economically deterministic point of view as such came to be questioned [in the 1970s]. Morooka Sukeyuki, for example, argued that history studies were insufficient and it is necessary to employ also sociology and anthropology in order to understand the burakumin. In other words, the economic subculture was in earlier times understood to altogether determine culture: a superstructure. When discrimination persisted despite external changes, then, what emerged was an understanding that culture as superstructure is autonomous and should be accordingly understood and dealt with.”⁵⁹ Writers and scholars such as Noma, Morooka, and Okiura spearheaded this cultural turn that was taking place in burakumin activism.⁶⁰ Another significant event at this time was the publishing arm of the BLL becoming the separate Liberation Publishing Company (henceforward LPC; *Kaihō shuppan sha*) in 1975.

⁵⁷ Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 230.

⁵⁸ An instance of this is the clash that took place in November 1974 between BLL supporters and teachers (JCP supporters) at Yōka High School in Hyōgo. See Uehara Yoshihiro’s depiction of the incident in Uehara, *Sabetsu to kyōiku to watashi* [Discrimination, Education, and I] (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2014), 82–120.

⁵⁹ Kurokawa, *Kindai burakushi*, 238.

⁶⁰ Among the seminal PLC publications at the time was Morooka Sukeyuki, Ōga Masayuki, and Okiura Kazuteru, *Buraku kaihō riron no sōzō ni mukete* [Towards the Creation of a Theory for Buraku Liberation] (Osaka: Kaihō shuppansha, 1981).

While individually motivated, Mikuni's coming out and his consequent writings for the burakumin cause can be said to have been encouraged in the post-1970s setting in which buraku activism became further independent from established Marxist parties such as the JCP. With this, identity politics became unbound from class struggles and came to be foregrounded in burakumin activism, unlike what was the case earlier. Mikuni and Nakagami's coming out as burakumin was also part of such a turn of events in burakumin history. The LPC, for example, was the original publisher of Mikuni's discussion with Okiura Kazuteru in 1997. Mikuni's writings since his coming out as burakumin, including his writing and directing of the 1987 film *Shinran: The Shining Path*, was part of such a cultural turn of burakumin politics and history.