

Same Color, Different Realities: Analysis of Black Experience in South Korea

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Abstract

Deliberate government policies, the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) and new migration patterns is shifting South Korea (hereafter Korea) towards multiculturalism and diversity but critics warn that ethnic nationalism, state-imposed integration and economic slowdown fuelled by Covid-19 restrictions have hardened anti-foreigner sentiments and impeded inclusion. This study investigated the experience of Black foreigners in Korea. Specifically, it explored how people of color, defined in this context as Black Africans and Blacks from North America and Europe, perceive Koreans and Korea. It examined the differences and similarities, if any, between the experience of Black Africans and African-Americans (including Blacks from Canada and Europe). Grounded in the theory of Universalist multiculturalism and using a mix of qualitative and quantitative survey questionnaires; findings indicate that Black Africans experience significant immigration complexities that often narrows their economic opportunities and restricts social integration. African-Americans, though treated better than Black Africans, are less liked compared to White Americans and more likely to experience discrimination, racism and cultural appropriation. In general, nationality-based preferences and skin color defines access, acceptance and integration of Blacks in Korea. The study recommends public education as a means to challenge nationalist sentiments and reverse subtle, anti-Black propaganda.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, South Korea, racism, politics, immigration

Multiculturalism in Korea

Historically situated in a precarious context and sandwiched between three great imperial powers (China, Russia and Japan), ethnic homogeneity and nationalism preserved and united Koreans prior to and during Japanese imperial rule. This devotion to a single, mono-ethnic identity is what many argue allowed Korea to endure through repeated attempts by her neighbors to absorb her- and has led to strong undercurrents of ethnocentrism. However, since 2004, Korea's government has turned to immigration as a panacea to the nation's festering challenges. Four are noteworthy. First, declining birth rate, its impact on society and government's renewed policy towards immigration. According to Reuters (2021), Korea has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, estimated at 0.84 in 2020; and 0.92 in 2021- a further drop from the previous year (OECD,

2020). State intervention, according to Kim and Kilkey (2017) included the successful Multicultural Family Policies geared towards facilitating the migration of brides from Southeast Asian countries to perform various reproductive roles as a means to increase the nation's population and diversify its culture. Other efforts consisted of light immigration, the introduction of child benefit as well as incentivizing and supporting newly-weds. Second, industrial growth and the need to bring in foreign workers principally from Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Again, relaxed immigration rules as well as quick processing of travel permits and business visas have allowed workers and businesses to flow in and out with little hindrance (Watson, 2010). Third, global migration towards Asia in general and Korea in particular. With award-winning music (K-Pop) and movies, futuristic technology, and exciting arts and culture, Korea's growing global influence, rooted in the Korea Wave (*Hallyu*), is a major pull, especially among young adults interested in exploring Asian and Korean culture. Finally, internationalization of higher education- a strategic and deliberate policy by successive administrations to internationalize Korea's higher education sector and attract students from across the region and beyond. With state aid, scholarships, inclusion of English as a language of instruction and relaxed student visa rules, Korean universities have become recipients of government funding geared towards increasing scholarships and grants to international students (Kwon, 2013).

Specific immigration policies geared towards multiculturalism can be divided into two- First Basic Plan for Immigration that included the 2004 Employment Permit System, 2006 Foreigner Policy Committee and 2008 Support for Multicultural Families. The Second Basic Plan was designed to unify policy goals across ministries and implement further ways of integration. These policies have increased the number of migrant workers, marriage immigrants, international students and business interests in Korea to the extent that the state projects 5% of the country's population in 2030 will be foreign-born residents (Ghazarian, 2018). Multicultural policies are however resisted by nationalists, opposition politicians as well as civil society due to disconnections between policy and reality. Im (2020) noted that opponents believe state policies are not far reaching enough citing the complicated migrant visa rules that ensures most migrant laborers remain temporary residents and factory workers with little prospects for long-term integration. A similar example is the increase in the number of foreigners who teach English but are neither considered as permanent additions to Korean society nor fully protected by employment law (Grant & Ham, 2013).

Kim & So (2018) contend that multiculturalism in Korea takes a top-bottom approach, often used by liberal politicians and political parties as a tool to bolster their party's international image and/or project Korea as an inclusive destination for internationals. They argue that the state positions multiculturalism as a political rhetoric and slogan rather than a way to change society. As a consequence, Korea seem not to be doing enough to protect the rights and privileges of migrant workers, immigrants, refugees and non-Korean long-term residents. They added that Korean multiculturalism remains focused on cultural and linguistic maintenance and celebrations, while ethnic minorities in Korea experience inequalities, marginalization, discrimination, and racism, including micro-aggressions that send subtle denigrating messages to foreigners in everyday

exchanges. According to Brannen & MacLellan (2014), anti-others culture in Korea is learnt through cultural norms, social institutions, educational sites and family settings. This stems from ethnocentrism- a belief in the integrity and supremacy of Korean culture or in its raw form, an absence of cultural diversity. Beneath the surface, concerns over losing national identity, traditions, cultural practices and economic threat to insiders are strongly shared by Koreans at all level of society.

Most Koreans therefore resist the idea of multiple cultures within Korea to the extent that even if an individual is born and raised in the state but is of different ethnic parenthood, such individuals are not fully regarded as Koreans (Lim, 2010). According to Change (2015), foreigners are evaluated based on skin color, nationality (Whites from Europe and North America are privileged) and (in)ability to speak Korean. Studies that examined the experience of foreign university students (Kim & Kim, 2020), foreign English teachers (Gray, 2017) and foreign workers (Froese, 2010) all suggests that there has been a long history of fluctuations that incorporated distant admiration of foreigners and passive resistance and discrimination. In some quarters, foreigners are perceived as threats to the concept of one-Korea and as a consequence face barriers that deny them to integrate culturally. The prevailing belief is that multiculturalism is about assimilating others into a dominant Korean culture. This is evidenced by attitudes and sentiments geared towards integrating a foreigner into the 'superior' Korean way of life (Lee, 2009).

In general, literature suggests that the Korea state and Koreans have mixed feeling towards foreigners- on one hand, immigrants were perceived to have increased crime rates but on the other hand, non-Koreans had also contributed to the development of Korean society. This echoes findings from the Asian Institute of Policy Studies (2013), which indicated that 80% of survey participants believed Koreans had no issues with foreigners and 65% indicated support for multicultural families. The study also suggested that younger Koreans with better education, overseas travels and exposure were more open to foreigners and in favor of multiracial families, compared to older Koreans. These findings may however not fully represent today's realities due in part to recent significant influx of new migrants from Africa; increasing populist politics within Korea's that reflects the rise of populism globally, economic slowdown- a consequence of Covid-19 restrictions, increasing cases of Asian hate in the United States and the resurgence of protectionism in international trade relations.

This research attempts to fill a growing gap in literature as it investigated the experiences of Black Africans and African Americans in Korea. The aim is to explore and analyse what people of color from multiple backgrounds, professions and nationalities share in common, if any, or experience uniquely. While this is not a pioneer study on the experience of foreigners in Korea (Hwang, 2016), it is novel. It was partly inspired by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that began in the United States and escalated worldwide after the brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA in 2020; and mainly focused on shining a particular searchlight on Blacks (both Africans and African Americans) in Korea. What do Black people think of Korea in terms of racism, integration, economic opportunities and access to Korean institutions- higher education, health care and Korea's immigration? How do their perception feed into the large debate on multiculturalism and integration in Korea? What unique experiences do they have of being

Black and of cultural appropriation? These questions are tackled in this mini perception-studies project that involved 100 participants. It is hoped that this work will be of interest to scholars involved in racism, ethnicity and Black studies outside the United States and Western Europe. As Asia in general and Korea in particular witnesses increasing inward migration, findings from this work can aid and/or guide politicians and policy makers across the subcontinent in understanding the experience and perception of Blacks in Korea and possibly Northeast Asia.

Methodology

To better understand Black people in the context of Korea's changing demographic and multicultural landscape, and collect varied perspectives from participants, mixed research methodology was employed for its emphasis in combining quantitative and qualitative data. In 2019 and 2020, qualitative and quantitative survey questionnaires were purposefully sent to over 100 Black Africans and African-Americans living within and outside Seoul (Korea's capital city) to explore their experience of being a racial minority in one of Asia's most mono-ethnic nation.

Available data neither indicates the number of Blacks from sub-Saharan African countries nor the general population of Black people resident in Korea. This void may be due in part to complexities associated with extracting data from the national immigration database but is non-the-less problematic. Existing data however shows that since 2005, immigrant numbers have increased by 9.7% on an annual basis. In 2009, there were 1.6 million foreigners in Korea, the following year, the number jumped to 2.04 million. By 2017, the figure continued its upward trajectory as numbers hit 2.18 million. In 2019, over 2.52 million foreigners were resident in Korea. With the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, numbers dropped to 2 million for the first time in over a decade. (Korean Immigration Service, 2020). Chinese and/or Taiwanese nationals are the significant majority, followed by immigrants from Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia...). Migrants from the United States constitute the third largest group (Ministry of Justice, 2020).

Selection of participants was therefore based on two factors- (1) snowballing sampling or chain-referral- a non-probability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit or refer future subjects from among their acquaintances. (2) Information gathered from the field suggesting where people of color are most concentrated (around institutions of higher learning, jobs and in urban centers). Survey questionnaires were distributed in-person and through email in the 2019 study but in 2020, only online distribution was possible due to Covid-19 protocols. This justified why participants for the 2019 studies were significantly more than that of 2020. Participants mainly included English teachers, factory workers, staffs of international organizations and/or multinational corporations, students, trailing spouses and college professors. Each questionnaire was divided into three sections- part one focused on participant's bio-data, part two on their everyday experience with Koreans and part three on the perception of Korean institutions- education, health and immigration. In terms of ethics, the survey not only clearly outlined

the rights of participants to opt in and out at their convenience but also reassured them of anonymity and confidentiality in handling their personal data. All participants gave their consent prior to engagement with the survey and all data was stored in a secure location.

Analysis of data was based on thematic approach- identifying, coding, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning embedded in the data. These followed rigorous procedures- returned surveys were systematically processed. A thorough familiarization process was undertaken before coding them into sections of texts and into broad thematic categories which best represented collated data. A repeat of the process was undertaken to ensure the validity and reliability of the process.

In presenting the specifics of data analysis, the 2019 African study is presented first, followed by the 2020 African-American study. This chronological arrangement is pertinent as it allowed, first, a thorough discussion of each study and afterwards, a combined analysis of findings. An additional goal was both to extract similarities and differences between these same yet different groups. Thereafter are the implications, recommendations and conclusion.

Black African study- As indicated above, snowballing sampling and fieldwork suggestions guided the decision to focus on and distribute surveys to particular individuals in specific demographics. A total of 73 participants living around Itaewon in Seoul, Ansan, Suwon, Dongducheon and Incheon originally from 15 sub-Saharan African countries- Nigeria, Cameroon, South Africa, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Congo, Uganda, Gabon. Kenya, Togo and Liberia responded to survey questionnaires conducted in October-November 2019. All participants had resided continually in Korea for an average of two and half years. Five participants had lived in Korea for more than ten years. In terms of gender distribution, 56% identified as male while 44% as female. A significant percentage of participants were between 20 and 40 years old. In terms of education, 62.5% possessed masters' degrees, 20% identified as still in college or had a first degree, while 17% only had high school diplomas. A total of 54% identified as being married while 45% were single. In exploring why participants came to Korea, 60% mentioned education, 30% business and/or work while 10% said travel and tourism. The immigration status of participants also varied- 28% students, 52% working, 7% asylum seekers and 13% were either undocumented or had overstayed their visit. In terms of Korean language competence, 58% indicated they had little or less than basic knowledge, 17% had basic understanding, 20% were above basic while only 4% said they were very competent.

Findings- Black Africans in Korea experience significant barriers to equal employment, face multiple immigration hurdles and encounter discrimination as well as bias in Korea.

Immigration is the most challenging problem confronting Black Africans in Korea. Although language incompetence as well as bias and stereotypes are problematic; respondents agreed that issues relating to visa renewal, visa conversion (from student to work visa), residency documentation, path to citizenship, business registration, appeal against deportation, Alien Registration Card (ARC) renewal are a constant concern. According to a participant, *"it is difficult to get things done at immigration. Most officers at the foreigners' desk are either unable to speak English or deliberately complicate things"*.

The inconsistency with which different immigration officers interpret or implement policy was also highlighted. Respondents believe that the outcome of each case is dependent on the immigration officer. One participant noted that *“Immigration officers interpret the law haphazardly. One may say yes while the other say no to the same matter. As a foreigner with little or no Korean language competence, how do you know what is right or wrong. It is unacceptable for officers to often use personal discretion.”* This is especially important, noted another respondent, as immigration officers come in two forms- *“friendly”* or *“racist- overtly strict and condescending”*. Visa renewal criteria imposed on students is also a concern. According to a participant, *“a key condition for visa renewal is for funds to come directly from your home country with bank statements showing money was wired to Korea. But in a situation where a student is self-sponsored, it becomes a challenge as such a student will not have a sponsor(s).”* If the latter is the case according to the respondent, *“Korean Immigration can withdraw or revoke the student visa”*. Participants also noted that it is almost impossible to be naturalised in Korea. The path to citizenship is unclear and difficult. *“Whether through marrying a Korean, long continuous stay in Korea of any other means, it is incredibly impossible to be Korean and enjoy equal rights as Koreans.”* The irony here is that there are Korean-Americans in the US, Korean-Canadians and elsewhere but in Korea, citizenship is impossible for Black Africans.

Korea’s labour market, as it is elsewhere, is stratified into three- professional, semi-skilled labour and unskilled work including factory jobs. For foreigners in general, corporate Korea is most discriminatory and impenetrable. Access to Korea’s public sector work is restricted to Koreans only. In addition to language barrier, participants believe White foreigners from Europe and North America are preferred when opportunities for professional jobs become available. *“Even if a Black African is qualified for a role, they are often not considered or shortlisted”* said a participant. Accordingly, participants agreed that among foreigners, there are more opportunities for Caucasians and Westerners. According to a respondent, *“I completed a master’s degree in English language from the United Kingdom but I am not allowed to teach English here because of my nationality- Zimbabwe.”* Currently, Korea’s Ministry of Education only allows nationals of six countries- Republic of Ireland, United Kingdom, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to teach English. One respondent said: *“They don’t employ Africans to teach English, even in private academies; no matter how good your English is. I am from Ghana and English is second nature.”*

Participants believe Korea’s tough immigration regime and limited access to corporate and semi-professional jobs are deliberate state policy and/or a reflection of Korea’s public sentiments towards Black Africans. *“The government is working hard to keep Korea mono-cultural and mono-ethnic by shutting outsiders, especially Blacks out”*. Another participant argued that it goes beyond race to economics, particularly in the context of covid-19 and stringent restrictions imposed on economic and social activities. *“Korea as a society has become more anti-foreigner as the economy shrinks and jobs become scarce”* she noted. A minority few contended that strict immigration regime is a function of *“disrespect for Black Africans. A sort of ranking that places Black Africans at the bottom of the ladder”*. One participant noted that, *“In the Korean immigration system there ought*

to be more transparency and opportunities.” She believes that in order to meet the labor shortage in industry, Korea can extend temporary work visas to Black Africans already in Korea. The system, according to many, pushes educated Africans into factory and unskilled labour. Inadvertently, the lack of proper documentation (expiry of student visa or work permits) directly imposes restrictions on Black Africans who are not judged by their competence, experience or level of education but by their skin colour and country of origin. A significant majority of participants, especially college graduates with a second degree are mostly dissatisfied with state regulations as well as with employer bias that bars them from professional and semi-skilled jobs. Many Korea-educated Africans are underemployed- working in factories and cleaning. In the words of a participant, *“Since finishing my master’s degree program in international business at Ajou University in 2018, I have worked in restaurants and bars because I could not get a proper job.”* Another noted that *“I have not had a proper job since finishing my second degree from a university in Seoul. All I do is factory work.”* Respondents agreed that tough immigration rules, lack of access to access to good jobs and negative stereotypes about Africa have created structural barriers designed against Black Africans.

Findings on the question of racism are mixed. Korea is home to a growing number of Blacks from Africa who are mainly concentrated in Itaewon, Ansan, Dongducheon, Suwon and Incheon. 65% of respondents believe Black Africans are neither treated fairly nor appreciated. Accordingly, a participant noted that *“Koreans are trying to get accustomed to foreigners and foreign culture but have lots of misconceptions, and still treat Africa as a country and not as a continent”*. Majority of respondents, over 60% noted that Koreans believe Africans are *“untrustworthy”, “ignorant”, “distrustful”, and “lack understanding”*. Another participant said, *“I believe they don’t like the black skin and are not exposed enough to international cultures, especially Africa culture.”* Outside Seoul- Korea’s capital city, particularly in remote locations and among older Koreans, noted that discrimination and distrust are more prevalent. Korea’s reserved, conservative culture, language difference and racial dissimilarities were blamed for significant levels of bias and stereotypes against Black Africans. A respondent noted that *“Older Koreans are always look at me funny- like I don’t belong here!”* While some blamed the educational system that does not contain enough content on diversity, inclusion and equality, others lay the blame elsewhere. *“The media in Korea portray Black Africans as beggars and suffering people who need help. This is being registered in their subconscious mind”* noted another participant.

On the other hand, racism in Korea is nothing similar to the experience of African-Americans in the United States. No participant indicated that their lives were at risk due to racial attacks, police brutality or hate crimes. Some participants believe Koreans are more curious and welcoming than racist. According to a respondent, *“Koreans with dual nationality, international exposure and college degree(s) are generally open to foreigners”*. Majority of participants work in Korean companies, are educated in Korean institutions, live in Korean communities, visit Korean hospitals and interact with Koreans on a day-to-day basis without fear of attack or racist brutality. From the findings, experience of racism

is occasional, not daily. Very few participants have experienced open racism personally, except for having to sit alone in public buses and on subway trains as most Koreans avoid contact or interaction. *“People just don’t like to sit beside me because I’m Black. I’m used to it now”* noted a respondent. Occasional experiences of racism are few and far in-between. Stories from other Blacks are somewhat generalised and retold. Several participants noted that access to justice and equity before the law, especially in settling labour disputes is swift, fair and unbiased. A participant said, *“I had a dispute with a Korean employer who not only owed me but also had sacked me unfairly. The Korean court ruled against the Korean man. The matter was judged fairly”*. Additionally, access to medical facilities and educational institutions were described as largely open. Participants agreed that a significant majority of Koreans are new to multiculturalism and Black foreigners.

In sum, most participants agreed that Korean immigration, described as *“complicated”*, *“unnecessarily tough and strict”*, is the single biggest obstacle to multiculturalism. However, they commended Korea’s higher institutions and quality medical care available.

African-American study- Again, using snowballing sampling technique, a total, 18 participants- all grouped as Black Americans- responded to the survey questionnaire in 2020. They included 14 female and four male participants. The age of respondents varied significantly- (13) identified as within the age of 20-29; three participants claimed to be just under 20 and two between 30 and 39. The participants also had varied academic qualifications- 10 respondents held four-year bachelor’s degrees, one had a two-year associates degrees, one held a master’s degree; four said they had some college education, while the final two indicated they had high school diploma or equivalent. A total of 15 participants indicated they were single, two were married and one identified as divorced. Five respondents cited studying through an institution as their reason for coming to Korea, two cited learning Korean language and culture, five mentioned military duties, three said teaching English, two cited work, and one identified as a trailing spouse. In terms of their length of stay in Korea, all participants but four had lived in Korea for more than a year.

Findings- Most participants noted that they had encountered public distancing, increasing racist attitudes, particularly since the pandemic began, making integration more complicated and harder. Others said they encountered cultural appropriation alongside other barriers.

Contrary to findings of the Black African study, a significant number of participants (85%) claimed to have experienced some form of discrimination, racist or race-related stereotypes that included unfriendly stares from young Koreans or avoidance by older Koreans. Most respondents noted that they were mostly regarded as Black African (and

almost with disrespect) until they (respondents) replied that they were Americans or Europeans! A respondent said, *"Many times, my American accent and nationality helped me stand out and earned me respect among Koreans. Once they know I am American and not African, they respected me more."* Here we see a race ranking of sort play out. Identity with an individual's on the basis of nationality can shape the relationship between a Black foreigner and a Korean. This also corroborated findings of discrimination from the Black African study. A participant who graduated from a Korean high school said, *"I was bullied in high school due to racism, classism, sexism and xenophobia. Although it was an English-speaking school with teachers from the US and Canada; most Korean students were not friendly"*. Another participant said they had experienced racism on *"multiple occasions"*, and added that someone once told her, *"You are pretty for a Black woman, but don't try to date a Korean man just marry a Black man"*. She also said *"some people look scared to be next to me or interact with me either on the bus or in public spaces. Sometimes, it is difficult."* Another participant added that, *"one time though, a little kid saw me in a convenience store and said. 'A foreigner, no wonder our country is going under.' It must've been something he heard from his parents or family as he was way too young but it was interesting."* The participant noted that the racist narrative may have originated from school, home or conservative media platforms both traditional and new but it does indicate hostility and resentment.

The outbreak of Covid-19 since early 2020 has ignited increasing racism and discrimination. Prolonged media reports in national newspapers (*Korea Times* and *Korea Herald*) indicating that new Covid cases are mainly from new arrivals into Korea may have inadvertently implied that foreigners from North America and Europe (the epicenters of the pandemic) were a threat to Korea's effort at containing the disease. A sizeable amount of participant believed that foreigners in general have had a *"rougher ride"* living in Korea. According to a respondent, *"As a long-term resident, I have noticed that people are even less friendly now than before. I know they are not sure if I am a new arrival but I've been here for years."* Another respondent said *"people just generally avoid me. It is much worse than before."*

Cultural insensitivity and appropriation are also obstacles to African-American integration in Korea. According to a respondent, Koreans fit all Blacks into a strait jacket. Several manifestations of one-frame-fit-all included *"feeling 'othered' on a daily basis, regardless of your Korean skills and how much you know about the Korean culture"*, *"struggling to mesh with Koreans especially the ones who deliberately refuse to develop personal relationships with Black foreigners"*, and *"plain sight avoidance whether on public transport or in public places."* Other insensitivities according to participants are wide ranging, including but not limited to: *"Inability to adapt foreign names into the Korean system, glass-ceiling on how far up you can go in jobs, if you have one; no representation in anything and, always being considered an outsider...even if you are a long-term*

resident. Otherness, colorism, stereotype, ignorance and the complexity involved in becoming a citizen are also problematic noted respondents. One participant said: "Some people come here with long-term ambition but are met with the implicit expectation that they should only be a language teacher." In terms of appropriation, parts of Black culture such as music and fashion are appropriated in Korea but Blacks are not. According to a participant, "Many months ago, I was barred from a night club in Itaewon- a suburb of Seoul but Black rap music was playing. It is upsetting. You play Black music but hate Black people!"

Findings also include significant differences between young and old Koreans. Most participants reported that Koreans who have had contact with westerners are more open and friendlier but older Koreans are not. On the one hand, comments like *"older Koreans like cab drivers are difficult and not fair"* and *"older Korean men are mostly condescending to Blacks"* indicated resistance but on the other hand, references to how America helped during the Korean War (1950-1953) show that older Koreans are not always against Americans. Interestingly however, while combing through the data, respondents seemed to express the view that young Koreans question the continued presence of the US Army in Korea and as a reason could resent Americans. According to a participant, *"I think the US military is seen as intrusive, often inconsiderate of the culture; primarily to the ignorance of not respecting customs and courtesies."* Another said, *"Korea have military technologies and capabilities now. Some American troops should go home."* A third respondent suggested that some Korean believe the US military have overstayed and is no longer that relevant. While a few comments are inadequate to make sweeping generalizations, they do indicate the presence of anti-US military sentiments and also show how divergent Koreans (young or old) perceive Americans.

Selective openness however emerged as a general pattern with which Koreans engage with Blacks. According to a participant, *"I think Koreans try to be fair, but sometimes, they favor White foreigners. An ideal foreigner is a White American or European. If you are a Black American or European, you are often construed and treated as an African."* A similar comment reads: *"There is bias when it comes to foreigners, based on where you are from as well as how you look."* These comments and many more indicated that Caucasians were treated more fairly than dark-skinned westerners. The extent to which this dynamics plays out is not clear-cut but a participant puts it succinctly when she noted that, *"fairness depends on your nationality, your education and your overall appearance"*.

Shared experiences

Multiculturalism in Korea is evolving but state-championed policies geared towards inclusion and diversity are at variance with public perception of immigration and

expectations of immigrants. Caught in the middle are foreigners in general and Blacks in particular who continue to collectively experience challenges. This section examines overlapping barriers that most participants confronted.

An aggregate of responses indicated that the greatest issue is with immigration. Both Black Africans and a few African-Americans complained about lack of support for foreigners who did not speak Korean as well as bureaucracy and discrimination. Comments included: *Korean immigration needs to be more customer-friendly to English speakers.* “*Work visa processes should be more transparent.*” “*The documentation forms are difficult to complete/understand without help.*” Specific complaints from African-American participants (English teachers) included the inability of F2 and F3 (dependent visa holders) to work in Korea even when qualified. This they say makes living in and integrating with Koreans difficult. According to a respondent, “*it is difficult for my family to stay here long-term- no longer than three years because my husband is not allowed to work*”. Respondents also complained of having issues with visa and release form. According to another African-American participant, “*E2 visas (teaching visas) are issued with a clause that requires a school to release its teacher if things don’t work out. Unfortunately, teachers do not have the ability to leave a toxic school without a letter of release. Most teachers are trapped.*” If this comment is true, it indicates that teachers are at the mercy of school principals who may or may not co-operate. As observed by another participant, “*a toxic school can trap a teacher caught between having their visa cancelled or enduring a bad work place. Both options are complex and complicated*”. Another knotty issue is the “*incredibly slow bureaucracy*” involved in accessing social services. A participant who identified as a Black African said: “*The fact is that every time, it gets harder to renew my student visa. I gave them (immigration) my F6 visa renewal documents at the very beginning of November 2018... since then, every week they call me to ask for a new document or they they’ve found something wrong with one I already gave them... I’m already 7 months pregnant and I need that visa to get government social welfare and health insurance.*” It is difficult to determine whether this is isolated or widespread.

In terms of how participants think they are perceived by Koreans, findings are mixed. Several participants agreed that Korean colleagues, professors, supervisors and managers are open and professional. One participant said that “*Black foreigners’ physical difference in a largely homogenous nation evokes a perception that Blacks are ‘a passing fancy’.*” Another said “*Most Blacks are perceived positively, noting that some Koreans ‘take an interest in learning things from our lives (music, fashion, culture) and point of view’.*” However, others think some Koreans are “*condescending*”, “*aggressive*” and “*unfriendly*”. Critical comments included: “*They think we are only here on a gap year, party animals, usually culturally incompetent.*” Another said “*They believe Blacks are ‘a burden to put up with, exotic, more violent, poor... and dirty.’*” One respondent balanced it this

way, *“I can see both the positive and negative perceptions that Koreans may think about or toward Black foreigners. On one hand, foreigners bring English learning, economic growth and new energy to Korea. On the other hand, Koreans feel that some foreigners are “taking up space”, lazy to learn the language, disrespectful and the reason for the rise in crime (and in the rise of COVID cases).”* The divergence of comments makes it difficult to generalize.

As regards job opportunities, an overwhelming majority responded that Blacks in general do not have equal access. According to a participant, *“Even if you’re fluent in Korean and qualified, chances are that a native-born Korean will be picked over you for the job. Foreigners here who do seem really successful got their jobs from abroad or specifically in conjunction with their “foreignness”.* Another participant said, *“I don’t think equality exists, Even if you’re fluent in the language you wouldn’t be hired outside of factory or construction jobs because you are a foreigner.* While most African-Americans have jobs, especially teaching English, comments indicate that they experience prejudice and gender bias. A participant said, *“I was offered a teaching job in Korea while in Texas but upon arrival, the school principal was shocked that I was Black. Maybe she thought Blacks are not as qualified!”* Remarks similar to this, suggest that public perception of an American is White! While a small majority claimed *“there are still many opportunities for Black foreigners”* like teaching English, factory and construction work, other indicated that foreigners experience glass ceiling in the work place, and *“...there are hidden barriers that restrict what and how much foreigners can do during their time here.”* Language and cultural difference are also problematic but not to a significant extent.

Implication

Findings from this study has several implications. The rise in undocumented migrants poses a threat to Korea’s economy. Migrants who initially came to Korea to study, visit or work but were unable to renew their visas and have decided to go underground may create public planning concerns, including ghettoization. As it is the case in France, the United States and South Africa, undocumented immigrants can cluster in ghettos, engage in crime and drugs, and increase economic inequality. If allowed to fester in Korea and this becomes the case, the skewed perception of and hard feelings towards Blacks in general will multiply. A case in point was illustrated recently when undocumented migrants, for fear of detention and/or deportation did not seek medical help even when they had symptoms of or contacted the highly infectious Covid-19 virus. According to Shin (2021), several unregistered foreign workers died of coronavirus in Korea as they avoided testing, tracking and treatment due to fear of arrest. Undocumented immigrants who were asymptomatic or had Covid but survived, it is difficult to quantify the extent to which they complicated containing the spread of the virus within their communities.

Furthermore, Korea's long-term goal of internationalizing its higher education by making it globally competitive may be dented due to student visa issues already discussed elsewhere in this paper. If a degree is not an end in itself but a means to social and economic ends, the value of Korea's higher education may become questioned in the long-term if and when Korea-educated migrant are not only unable to find work (other than factory and menial labor) but also encounter significant immigration issues while studying and after graduation. As shown in this study, a significant number of Korea-educated Black Africans are trapped in factory work due in part to a combination of strict immigration policies, anti-Black sentiments and limited forward and backward linkages between universities and corporate Korea.

A bigger threat to multiculturalism in Korea, based on the experiences of Black migrants is the inadequacy of government's policy in facilitating, entrenching and institutionalizing a culture of acceptance and inclusion of all foreigners; allowing them the opportunity to truly and fully integrate in Korea, if they so desire. The current policies are adequate to facilitate inward migration of brides to cover-up shortfalls in the marriage market, adequate to attract international students into Korean universities to boost their world rankings, adequate to bring in labor to work in factories and the service industry and adequate to draw in visitors interested in exploring Asia's entertainment capital but inadequate to shape public understanding of migration and migrants, especially with long-term plans in Korea. While the state cannot control critical, anti-immigration rhetoric from opposition political parties, more can be done to avoid a society where people are judged not by the content of their character but by the color of their skins.

Recommendations

Inward migration and multiculturalism are relatively new in Korea but combating passive racism, unwritten race hierarchy and color discrimination requires policy interventions, awareness campaigns and practices that will reduce obstacles to equality and diversity. Immigration reform in two key areas is recommended. First, international students' visa rules that require holders to show evidence of funds transferred from their home country as a condition to renew is both punitive and unfair, especially for matured and self-sponsoring students. For migrant workers and English teachers, visa clauses that tie workers to employers often gives the latter undue advantage over the former. In both cases, these rules should be relaxed to reflect international best practices that allow international students to work, renew and/or leave toxic employers without threats of visa cancellation and deportation.

The introduction and enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation that bans all kinds of gender, disability, age, language, country of origin, sexual orientation, physical condition,

academic background and others is needed urgently. This will especially protect migrant workers from undue dismissal, unequal pay, hazardous working conditions and unfair employment terms and conditions. Similarly, the ratification of the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families which according to the Human Rights Commission, Korea is yet to ratify, is equally needed. Korea has a strong gender and sexual rights movement that made gender-based crusades resonate within society but not so with race and inequality issues.

Deliberate addition of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) awareness and/or teaching in academic curriculum from middle school and beyond can help young Koreans overcome anxiety towards Black students, teachers and neighbors. Anti-black prejudices are often picked up at home, in conservative media and around social circles but are either unchallenged or reinforced within educational institutions (Kim, 2015). Importantly also, decolonizing the curriculum to reflect and include knowledge from a broader range of sources and help reduce prejudice and foster improved learning outcomes. Periodic training on implicit bias should be scheduled for all stakeholders (student, teachers, administration and policy makers) within the system.

Finally, targeted mass media campaigns both on traditional and new media platforms can serve as mediums to showcase discriminations experienced by Blacks, challenge longstanding beliefs on racial superiority and progressively dismantle negative perceptions of Blacks. Strategic communication principles, including purposeful messages in the public domain can also shift negative public sentiment towards understanding and acceptance.

Conclusion

The nuanced experiences of people of color in Korea vary in significant ways. Points of convergence included feeling mistreated or misunderstood, cultural appropriation, micro-aggression and racism, and limited access to corporate Korea. Comments by participants of African origin leads us to believe that Korea is structurally and institutionally designed to restrict their economic and social opportunities as well as keep them at the bottom of the social ladder through tough and shifting immigration laws. Others commentaries suggested that the system deliberately relegates Black Africans to factory work. Non-African Black respondents also highlighted experiencing discrimination. The point of divergence, especially for African American participants, most of whom were more personally offended by the 'racist' experiences, and puzzled by how on one hand, Korea's preference for White Americans who are often presented with more economic and social opportunities; and on the other hand, Korea's cultural appropriation of Black culture-music, fashion and art without acknowledging Blacks in general and Black westerners in

particular. A collective feeling built on ethno-nationalism, anti-foreigner rhetoric and Korea's superior way of life will perpetuate racist sentiments and discriminatory attitudes towards Black immigrants.

Korea's version of multiculturalism is therefore yet to fully recognise minority groups as equals, clearly lay out a roadmap for permanent residency and citizenship, and yet to recognise the social rights of tax-paying immigrants. While some argue that resistance to multiculturalism is due to perceived threats to mono-ethnicity, sudden demographic shifts and illegal immigration from Southeast Asia and Africa; others add that socioeconomic realities, recession and political fragmentation not only threatens the concept of nation state; it also influences the dilution of other important differences that do not necessarily entail a shared culture. Findings from this work echoes Eagan (2020) study that highlighted two other primary objections to multiculturalism, namely- that it favors the good of certain groups over the common good, creating preference for certain minority interest; and that it undermines the notion of Korean citizenship. However, the end goal of multiculturalism should be to protect, through legislation, policies and education, the political, social and economic rights of all inhabitants within a state, especially those of non-mainstream cultures whose rights may be at risk.

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