

Toward Understanding Korean and African American Relations

Introduction

This lesson plan is designed to help students understand the nature of Korean and African American relations in the United States. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles civil unrest (1992) and highly publicized boycotts against Korean American merchants by African American residents in New York (1990) and Los Angeles (1991), the apparent conflict between Korean and African Americans emerged as one of the most visible and explosive issues of urban America. To understand the nature of Korean and African American relations we must examine the economic, cultural, and ideological factors. Equally important, we must understand how Korean and African Americans perceive each other, and situate the role of race and class in Korean and African American relations.

Objectives

- To explore the nature of relationships between Korean and African American communities;
- to compare and contrast the experiences, concerns, and goals of Korean and African American communities;
- to examine and challenge pervasive myths and misinformation about the socio-economic, cultural, and political experiences of Korean and African Americans; and
- to examine prospects for coalition-building between Korean and African American communities.

Key Questions

- What are the root causes of conflict between Korean and African Americans?
- What are the myths and realities of Korean-African American relations?
- How did the coverage in the media shape and influence the nature of Korean-African American relations?
- How do we look at minority-minority conflict in relation to the declining number of whites, whose power remains dominant but is being transformed?
- How can we develop trust and coalitions between Korean and African American communities?

Analysis

Economic, Socio-cultural, and Ideological Factors

Since the early 1980s, Korean-African American conflicts have surfaced in several cities in the United States. With the increase of Korean-owned businesses in African American neighborhoods, complaints, disputes, and boycotts against Korean American merchants have intensified during the 1980s and 1990s. The hostility toward Korean American merchants was fueled by several factors, including the shooting death of Latasha Harlins and subsequent probationary sentence imposed on Soon Ja Du; the over-representation of Korean-owned stores in African American and Latino

neighborhoods; and the media perpetuation of images of Korean Americans as rude, greedy, selfish merchants who refuse to learn the English language (1).

The Korean-African American relationship involves immigrant-minority-merchants and native-minority-customers, unique conditions and circumstances that must be examined. In the context of economic despair, many African Americans have perceived Korean American merchants as "aliens" who have "taken over" their communities and are a threat to their economic survival. Some African Americans perceive Korean American merchants as newcomers in a long line of "outsiders" who have exploited African Americans.

Korea underwent rapid industrialization and westernization after World War II and especially during the 1970s. American values and ideals became a part of Korean culture and the national identity. Many Korean immigrants, in this sense, have been exposed to American culture and society even before landing on these shores. In the course of this presocialization, however, some Korean immigrants have been exposed to negative images of African Americans as criminals, welfare recipients, alcoholics, drug addicts, and/or lazy individuals. Additionally, having been exposed to American values, many Korean immigrants believe in the notion of America's meritocracy: one should be able to rise as high as one's talents and abilities permit. This meritocratic ideology is consistent with Confucian values that one's social ranking is determined by one's educational background. Because of the relatively lower educational attainment of African Americans compared with their own high educational background, many Korean immigrants tend to look down on African Americans (2).

Historically, non-African American merchants have dominated the economy of African American communities. The "middleman minority" theory (Blalock, 1967; Bonacich, 1973; Bonacich and Jung 1982; Loewen, 1971) suggests that "because of their economic niche, immigrant groups (i.e., Koreans) are likely to experience friction with at least three important segments of the population: clientele, competitors, and labor unions." Hostility between the middlemen and the customers whom they serve emerges from day-to-day customer/merchant interactions. The middleman minority theory predicts that Korean merchants cannot avoid friction with African American residents because of the built-in conflictual relationship with their African American customers. It is easy to see how the problems can be exacerbated when the sellers are "immigrant" and the buyers are "poor."

The middleman minority thesis provides a very pessimistic future for Korean-African American relations. The theory suggests that Korean immigrants must get out of African American areas, leave the occupation of shopkeeper altogether, or work with the African American community to achieve reconciliation. The economic factor in the merchant-client relationship is, no doubt, one of

the main sources of the conflict between Korean and African Americans. However, it does not appear to be the sole, or even the most important, factor.

Cultural misunderstanding between the two groups plays an important role in fueling and sometimes escalating the confrontations. African American customers often complain that Korean merchants treat them disrespectfully, and say the merchants can't communicate with them. "Monocultural people (i.e., Koreans) doing business in a multi-cultural society is potentially problematic. Korean immigrant merchants don't know how to interact with customers," declared Larry Aubry of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission. According to Stewart (1993), Koreans and African Americans have different sets of rules concerning proper attitudes and behaviors in the business setting. If the rules are violated, a negative reaction should be expected.

Korean merchants most frequently mentioned loudness, bad language, and shoplifting as inappropriate behaviors by black patrons, stating that African Americans should show respect and courtesy, and should apologize more frequently. African American patrons commonly believed that Korean merchant/employee held negative attitudes toward them, ignoring and watching them constantly, as well as throwing change on the counter instead of placing it in the customer's hand.

Confrontations also derive from the clash of ideology between the two groups. Korean and African Americans seem to have different perceptions about America. For example, becoming an independent entrepreneur represents "success" to many African American residents of the inner city while it is nothing more than an avenue for "making a living" to many Korean immigrants. Because the majority of Korean immigrants came after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, they are not cognizant of the long history of racial discrimination and the African American struggle for equality and freedom.

Unaware of the history of oppression and exploitation of minority groups by white America, Korean immigrants believe that America is a "land of opportunities." Korean immigrants often show no respect toward African American customers who are frequently unemployed and dependent upon government programs. African Americans often perceive Korean Americans as a "model minority" who are succeeding and assimilating into American society.

The term "model minority" suggests that minorities (i.e., African Americans and Latinos) should follow the footsteps of Asian Americans who are "making it" on their own without government assistance. High educational attainment levels, over-representation in small businesses, and high family incomes among Korean Americans are compared with other minority groups and are presented as evidence of Korean American success and status as America's model minority.

That notion poses a major challenge to the formation of inter-ethnic coalitions. African Americans may raise the question, "Why should we forge coalitions with Korean Americans, who are more successful than even whites?" In other words, it pits Asian (Korean) Americans against African Americans and Latinos. In summary, confrontations derive from the different historical, economic, and ideological experiences of groups.

Before the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest, Korean and African Americans tried to improve relations. The murder of four Korean American merchants in April 1986 in South Central Los Angeles facilitated the formation of the Black-Korean Alliance (BKA). Despite the efforts of the BKA and area churches, the situation deteriorated as was evidenced on the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest. However, it is important to acknowledge that the BKA tried to institutionalize cross-cultural coalition-building.

Implementing the Lesson

Pass out the handouts to students, and have the students respond to the questions. They may work in small groups or individually. For homework, students might look up one or more of the topics or events covered here and report later to the class.

Endotes

1. Edward Taehan Chang and Angela E. Oh, "Korean American Dilemma: Violence, Vengeance, Vision," in *One Nation, Divisible, Multiculturalism and Radical Democracy*, edited by Dean Harris (Greenwood, 1995).
2. Research shows that Koreans have one of the highest educational attainment levels in the United States. For example, 69 percent of Korean household heads in southern California possessed college degrees. See Eui-Young Yu, *Korean Community Profile: Life and Consumer Patterns* (Los Angeles: Korea Times, 1990), 7-9.

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Handout 1

A Chronology of the Black-Korean Encounters in the United States

- 1872** The first black church established in Los Angeles. The present day First African Methodist Episcopal Church was born out of this church.
- 1904** The first Korean church (Methodist) in Los Angeles was established on Magnolia Avenue near Pico Boulevard.
- 1942-50** *Defense Migration.* A large number of African Americans migrated to Los Angeles and settled in the South Central area to work in the defense industries.
- 1950-53** *The Korean War.* Over 1 million Koreans were killed, and more than 10 million Koreans were separated from their family members.
- 1981** *Jamaica Boycott, New York.* A dispute between a Korean merchant and an African American customer developed into a boycott of the store. The organized boycott continued for eight weeks.
- 1983** *Boycott of Korean-owned Stores Urged.* During the months of August and September, a major African American newspaper, the Los Angeles *Sentinel*, ran a five-week series charging that the "African American community has literally been taken over by Asians in the past five years," and urged fellow African Americans to boycott Korean-owned stores.
- 1984** *Anti-Korean Sentiments Spread.* Black media attacks against Korean Americans intensified in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. In Chicago, it was reported that "Koreans are planning to take over Southern Chicago 47th Street District." In New York, it was reported that approximately 40 out of 160 stores on 125th Avenue in Harlem were owned by Korean Americans. In Los Angeles, Korean American merchants were accused of "exploiting the Black community."
- 1986** *Black-Korean Alliance (BKA).* The deaths of four Korean American merchants in April in South Central Los Angeles triggered the formation of the Black-Korean Alliance. The Alliance continued dialogue until 1992, when it was dissolved.
- 1988** *Tropic Market Boycott, New York.* A Korean merchant was accused of mistreating an African American woman, and a boycott was organized, lasting for four months. Three separate boycotts targeted Korean stores in Brooklyn, Harlem, and Jamaica.
- 1989** *Slauson Boycott, Los Angeles.* A Black organization called for a boycott of the Slauson Swapmeet store owned by Korean Americans.
- 1990** *Red Apple Boycott, New York.* A Haitian woman accused a Korean merchant of assault. It drew national attention as the media sensationalized it as a racial confrontation between Korean and African Americans. The boycott lasted for one year and five months.
- 1991** *Latasha Harlins Shooting, Los Angeles.* The shooting of Latasha Harlins by a Korean American shopkeeper, Soon Ja Du, in South Central Los Angeles intensified the already volatile relationship between the two communities. Bitterness escalated when Soon Ja Du was released on probation.
- John's Market Boycott, Los Angeles.* A shooting death of an African American by a Korean American merchant intensified the racial animosity. Although it was ruled as a justifiable homicide by police, African American organizations called for a boycott of the store. It lasted for four months.
- 1992** *Los Angeles Civil Unrest.* Civil unrest erupted on April 29 when the news broke that the jury had acquitted the four police officers accused of beating African American motorist Rodney King. The three days of civil unrest resulted in 53 deaths and nearly \$1 billion in property damage. South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown suffered major damages. In South Central Los Angeles, more than 560 businesses were destroyed. In Koreatown, more than 300 businesses were burned and looted. Approximately 2,300 Korean American businesses suffered damage as a result of the civil unrest. The total loss to Korean-owned businesses was estimated at \$400 million.
- A number of organizations became active in organizing and promoting dialogue and cooperation between racial and ethnic groups in Los Angeles. These included the Coalition of Neighborhood Developers, Multicultural Collaborative, and Colors United. Korean and African American writers and artists initiated various collaborative projects in order to promote racial harmony.
- 1993** Nineteen Korean Americans were murdered by non-Korean robbers in Los Angeles.
- 1994** Fifty Los Angeles African American youths were invited to Korea under an annual cultural exchange/scholarship program sponsored by the Korean government. A number of church groups also organized scholarship and Korea tour programs for Black youths and church leaders.

Handout 2

Myths and Realities of Korean-Black Relations

Interethnic misperceptions, conflicts, and tensions between minority groups (i.e., Korean-African American, Latino-African American, Asian American-Latino) in American cities have been an increasing concern. Korean immigrants, like many other new immigrants, have little knowledge of the African American experience, history, and culture. African Americans, due to the media and educational system, have little knowledge of Asian American groups, including Korean Americans.

Reportage on these groups focuses overwhelmingly on negative interactions between minority groups and reinforces negative stereotypes. An example of this is reportage of the Korean-African American conflict in papers such as the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, or of black crime in Asian communities as reported in Asian language papers. In mainstream papers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*, coverage of positive aspects of the African American community is minimal, and coverage of Asian communities often tends to portray them as "model minorities," thereby pitting them against other minority groups such as African Americans and Latinos.

Many observers of Korean-African American relations believe that Korean-owned stores were targeted by rioters during the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest. Lack of accurate information and adequate education have often created myths and misperceptions. Politicians, the media, and community leaders have exploited the issue by endorsing these myths and stereotypes. To reconcile and begin the reconstruction process, we must separate myths from realities because myths have played an important role in fueling and escalating the confrontation between Korean and African Americans.

Myth 1: Korean immigrants are receiving special loans and assistance from the American government.

Fact: False. Korean immigrants are *not* entitled to receive any special assistance from the government. Southeast Asian *refugees* are entitled to receive special consideration and assistance from the government because of their status as political refugees. However, immigrants are not eligible to receive any special loans or economic assistance from the government.

Myth 2: Korean Americans are rude and disrespectful to African American customers.

Fact: Indeed, some Korean American merchants are rude and disrespectful to their customers. It is equally important to acknowledge that many Korean American merchants have gone extra-miles to accommodate the needs of African American customers. Furthermore, cultural differences are sometimes misinterpreted as being rude and disrespectful. Koreans and African Americans have different sets of rules concerning what is appropriate attitudes and behaviors. For example, Koreans are taught not to make eye-contact with elders and strangers. If you make eye-contact with an elder person, it is considered not only rude and disrespectful, but also a direct challenge to his or her authority. In American culture, however, direct eye-contact is interpreted as respectful during interaction.

Myth 3: Korean American merchants only conduct business in African American communities.

Fact: In Los Angeles, Korean-owned businesses are dispersed all over the city. The clientele of Korean-owned businesses in southern California are as follows: 48 percent white; 22 percent Korean American; 17 percent Latino; and only 10 percent African American. However, the proportion of Korean-owned stores in African American neighborhoods is higher in other areas such as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta.

Myth 4: Korean merchants are foreigners who do not have a right to be in this country.

Fact: Most Korean Americans are here legally and are either permanent residents or American citizens. According to the 1990 census, 67.6 percent of Korean Americans are U.S. citizens by birth or naturalization.

Myth 5: Korean American merchants do not hire African American workers.

Fact: Merchants are in a very difficult position—damned if you do; damned if you don't. During the 1960s, Jewish Americans were accused of operating a "slave market" for underpaying African American workers. Recently, Korean American merchants are being accused of not hiring African American employees. Even if most Korean-owned mom-and-pop stores hired one or two African American employees, it would have very little economic impact on the African American community. Minimum wage-paying jobs are not going to solve inner-city economic problems. Korean American merchants must do more to hire as many African American employees in their stores. However, it is wrong to blame Korean merchants for creating chronic economic problems in the inner city.

Myth 6: Korean American merchants often sell inferior products for a higher price.

Fact: A slightly higher price is normal for all small neighborhood convenience stores and is certainly not limited to Korean-owned stores. In exchange, consumers get the time-saving convenience of shopping close to home. Overall, mom-and-pop stores can neither compete with the large chain stores nor bypass the wholesalers and bargain directly with the manufacturers. A rudimentary understanding of supply and demand should make this situation abundantly clear.

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Handout 3
Building Coalitions Between African and Korean Americans

Contrary to popular belief Korean and African Americans share many traits and areas of common concern, including a history of racial oppression, economic exploitation, and political subjugation. Koreans share a history of suffering with African Americans, having endured Japanese colonial rule (1910-45), which undertook genocidal measures against the people and their culture.

To understand Koreans and Korean Americans, one must grasp the concept of *han* which distinguish Koreans from other Asian groups. The deep meaning of *han* can only begin to be understood in feelings of resentment, bitterness, grievance, or regret. Koreans and Korean Americans often express that "they lived life full of *han*," and developed *hwabyong*, a disease of frustration and rage following misfortune. I believe that the Korean ethos of *han* and African American, of soul are very similar concepts.

Korean American churches play a major role in the community, as does the church in the African American community. In the early twentieth century, Korean immigrant churches and church groups played a large role in the nationalistic independence movement of the Korean people from Japanese colonization of their country. African American churches have played a similar historic function in uniting African Americans in independence and civil rights movements. Yet, few Korean immigrants are aware of the role of the African American church, as few African Americans are cognizant of the role of the Korean immigrant church in the United States. These types of knowledge need to be conveyed to the larger Korean and African American communities.

	Korean Americans	African Americans
<i>History</i>	colonized by Japan; contract laborers to Hawaii	forced entry as slaves
<i>Economic</i>	manual labor; the source of cheap labor	no or limited upward mobility
<i>Political</i>	"aliens ineligible to citizenship"	"separate but equal"
<i>Racism</i>	second class citizens	second class citizens
<i>Ethos</i>	<i>han</i> and <i>jung</i>	soul and blues

Handout 4
Questions

Handout #1

- What contact have you had with Korean or African Americans?
- What are some similarities and differences between the Korean and African American experiences?

Handout #2

- What are some of the media images of African and Asian Americans? How do those images affect inter-ethnic relations, e.g. between Korean and African Americans?
- What are some of the myths and realities of Korean-African American relations?
- How is Korean-African American conflict represented in light of the declining number of whites, whose power remains dominant but is being transformed?

Handout #3

- What are the prospects for Korean-African American coalition-building?
- Did the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest do anything to bring about an understanding between Korean and African Americans? Or did it exacerbate existing conflicts between the two groups?

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