

BUILDING MINORITY COALITIONS: A CASE STUDY OF KOREAN AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

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Since the early 1980s, Korean-African American conflicts have emerged as one of the most explosive issues of urban America. In the context of economic despair, many African Americans have perceived Korean merchants as "aliens" who have "taken over" their community. In order to alleviate and prevent tension between the two communities, Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission convened the meeting between the two communities, and formed the Black Korean Alliance (BKA) in 1986. The primary purpose of the BKA was to disseminate positive information and take preventive measures. Despite attempts, tension escalated in 1991 when two African American customers were shot and killed by a Korean American merchant in two separate incidents. Therefore, it is extremely important for us to learn from the failures of the BKA. Korean American and African American relations is like a "key of dynamite" ready to explode. The real challenge for Korean Americans and African Americans is how to forge coalition by maximizing commonalities while minimizing differences before it is too late.

INTRODUCTION

Waves of immigrants from all parts of the world are changing the face of Los Angeles. Korean Americans are one of the newest and fastest growing population in the United States. Los Angeles has the largest concentration of Korean American population in the United States. Because of dramatic demographic shifts, a growing number of researchers, scientists, writers, and scholars are focusing on the study of the rapidly changing character of Los Angeles. The focus of interest in race relations in America has begun to shift from white-black to intra-Third world (minority-minority) relationships because of these rapid population shifts (see Chang 1991, pp. 169-178; forthcoming). Recently, there has been growing tensions between Korean merchants and African American residents in South Central Los Angeles. Within a three months period between March and June 1991, two African Americans were shot and killed by Korean American merchants. These two cases focused public attention and generated scholarly interests on the conflict between Korean and African Americans.

Since the early 1980s, Korean-African American conflicts have surfaced in many urban areas in the United States. Sometimes, it resulted in a violent confrontation. In New York, African American residents boycotted a number of Korean stores on 125th Street in Harlem, with several heated and violent confrontations in 1984 (*New York Times*, November 24, 1986). During the same time, at least 11 Korean-owned stores in Washington D.C. were fire-bombed. In one incident, a Korean woman was shot and killed.¹ The *Philadelphia Daily News* (November 15, 1986) reported the anti-Korean boycott in a special feature story titled "Go Back To Korea." In Chicago in 1984, the *Metro News* (May 12, 1984) an African American newspaper, claimed that "Koreans are planning to take over Southern Chicago 47th Street District." On January 18, 1990, a haitian woman was allegedly beaten by the manager and employees of Red Apple, a Korean-operated store, leading to a highly-publicized boycott of the store by African American residents in Brooklyn.

In Los Angeles, James Cleaver, executive editor of a weekly African American newspaper, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* (August 11, 1983), charged 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. However, no major violent clashes between Korean merchants and African American residents have occurred in Los Angeles until 1991. Of course, there have been several isolated cases of confrontation. The National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had called for a boycott of Korean stores in 1987. The Organization of Mutual Neighborhood Interest (OMNI) stated a one-day boycott of the Slauson (November 18, 1989) and Inglewood Indoor Swap Meet.

Unlike other cities, where boycotts often lasted several months or resulted in violence, the OMNI boycott of November 1989 ended without any violent confrontation and within a relatively short period of time. In fact, the boycott lasted only a day. Two weeks later, on December 2, 1989, representatives of OMNI and the Slauson Indoor Swap Meets met and settled the issues. Although the BKA was not directly involved in the mediation process, BKA members were instrumental bringing the two sides together to prevent potentially violent clashes between Korean merchants and African American residents in the Los Angeles area.² For these reasons, Los Angeles has been

¹*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, November 5, 1984; *The New York Times*, January 19, 1985; *Korea Times*, January 22, 1985.

²OMNI demanded action by Korean merchants on the following issues: dressing rooms for customers, the listing of all merchants public record, a 72-hour exchange policy and signs posted announcing this policy, courteous, respectful and fair treatment by merchants of consumers, a procedure for registering complaint, and a policy for returning and/or refunding damaged merchandise. Two other issues were not settled at the first two meetings. These were a price policy

often celebrated as a "model" for other cities to emulate. However, two separate shootings of Latasha Harlins and Lee Arthur Mitchell by Korean merchants in 1991 were a crushing blow to the several years of efforts by BKA and other organizations to build mutual trust and peace between the two communities. Where did it go wrong? What needs to be done to prevent tragic loss of human lives by these senseless shootings?

Most newspaper and scholarly articles highlighted the conflictual nature of Korean-African American relations reinforcing the negative images of racial minorities. What has been done to alleviate tensions and improve the relationship between Korean merchants and African American residents of South central Los angeles? In this article, I intend to document various efforts that have been made to alleviate tensions. This is a historical and descriptive study of the Black Korean Alliance (BKA) and Korean and African American churches, which has been actively promoting mutual understanding and harmony between the two groups. In addition, I will analyze the role of the Bradley administration by examining administration policies, or lack of policies, in regard to Korean-African American relations. In the end, I hope to provide concrete suggestions to build a coalition and to improve relations between the two communities.

BLACK KOREAN ALLIANCE (BKA)

History

The BKA is a non-profit organization serving the "symbolic" function of bridging the gap between Korean American and African American community. The purpose of BKA is to prevent and reduce conflicts and tensions between African Americans and Koreans by facilitating better communications and on-going dialogue. It is neither a leadership nor a grass-roots organization, but a coalition of agencies: representatives from businesses and business organizations, churches and community organizations.

In April 1983, the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission (LACHRC) conducted a hearing on increasing tensions between Korean merchants and South Central Los Angeles residents. Allegations were raised that Korean business owners were discourteous, arrogant and insulting and did not hire African Americans. A representative of the Korean Grocers and Liquor Retailers Association of Southern California, testified that there was a need

for merchandise and a hiring policy for residents. Since a majority of Korean stores are family-run, they do not hire more than one or two employees. A typical Korean store either hires family members or Latino immigrants. Korean merchants also expressed reluctance to post prices on merchandise because of competition with other Korean merchants.

for African Americans and Koreans to work together.³ In late 1984, the Commission assisted in the formation of the Black-Korean Coalition (BKA). The objective of the BKA was to develop a model for facilitating dialogue and improving relations that would eventually mitigate tensions in target areas and then replicate this model in other areas with similar problems. However, BKA remained inactive for a few years because the situation seemed to be calming down.

Again, the murder of four Korean merchants in April 1986 drew public attention to problems between Korean merchants and African American residents in South Central Los Angeles. Although there was no direct evidence to suggest that these crimes were racially motivated, the clear implication of these shootings were that they reflected an increase in tensions between the two groups. In May 1986, the first meeting of the African American Korean Community Relations Committee was convened and the group later changed its name to the one that it is known by today, the Black Korean Alliance (BKA). In the beginning, the BKA had made a conscious decision not to get involved in crisis intervention or the mediation process. Instead, the primary purpose of the BKA was to disseminate positive information and take adequate preventive measures.

Given the urgent nature of the problem, BKA meetings were well attended in the beginning by representatives of religious, public and private, political, business, civic, police and community-based organizations of both the African American and Korean communities. Participants showed enthusiasm to work toward mutual understanding and a peaceful resolution between the two minority groups. Altogether, twenty-three individuals representing fourteen organizations attended the June 9, 1986 meeting.⁴

BKA is an ad hoc committee consisting of volunteer members. Unlike most ad hoc organizations, the BKA has been able to sustain itself and continue as an organization since 1986. One reason for its longevity can be attributed to the efforts of two dedicated and qualified staff members of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission: Jai Lee Wong and Larry Aubry.⁵

³Its name has been changed to the Korean American Grocery Association of Southern California (KAGRO) in 1989. The KAGRO was founded in 1982 and has 3,300 members in Southern California as of 1991.

⁴Organizations that were present at the meeting were: the United Way, the Korean Grocery Association of Southern California, the Westminster Neighborhood Association, the Korean Small Business Association of South Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Urban League, the Ecumenical Council, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Los Angeles Police Department, the Korean Federation of Los Angeles, the Southern California Korean Council of Churches, the Oriental Mission Church, Korean American Coalition, the Koreatown Development Association, and the Korean Development Association.

⁵Larry Aubry has served as a staff member of the BKA from the beginning, along with Paul

Organizational Structure of the BKA

Initially, the BKA has identified the following areas as major problems in Korean-African American relations: insufficient hiring of African Americans in the neighborhood, lack of community involvement by Korean merchants, high-crime rates, lack of joint-ventures for economic development, lack of trust, lack of understanding of cultural differences, lack of communication, and "mythunderstanding" of each other. The BKA established five subcommittees to effectively deal with these issues: employment, community education and cultural exchange, fund-raising, religious leadership, and economic development.

Korean owners of mom-and-pop stores were often accused of taking jobs away from African American workers by hiring only fellow Koreans, Latinos, or other immediate family members. This has generated great animosity between the two ethnic groups. In order to alleviate these tensions, the employment subcommittee was established to enhance a positive relationship between merchants and area residents by providing employment and job opportunities, and to hold seminars to educate and inform businesses.

The Community Education and Cultural Exchange subcommittee was established to promote positive relations between the African American and the Korean community through community education and cultural exchange programs. This subcommittee sponsored Christmas Food-Baskets in 1986 and 1987 with little success. Food-Baskets was perceived as a "give-away" or "hand-out" by the African American community. In particular, a few African American members argued that "we want jobs and opportunities, not freebees". As a result, the Christmas Food-Basket program was discontinued after 1987.⁶

The Community Education and Cultural Exchange subcommittee also sponsored cultural awareness and crime prevention seminars in 1987, and small business seminars in conjunction with the YWCA in 1988. Its aim was to promote feelings of cooperation and mutual respect at the grass roots level. This subcommittee also facilitated, along with the Religious subcommittee, a cultural trip of African American ministers to South Korea in 1986.

Since a majority of Korean Americans and African Americans are Christians, the Religious subcommittee serves an important function. African American ministers traditionally have played a leadership role in both sacred and secular issues. Korean ministers also played an important role providing

Louie. With the retirement of Paul Louie, Jai Lee Wong began to work as a Korean bilingual staff person for the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission as of July 20, 1987.

⁶The 1986 Food-Basket program was a success, serving 600 needy people.

leadership in the political, ideological and cultural sphere within the Korean American community. The Religious sub-committee has facilitated several African American and Korean ministerial meetings, joint worship services and choir exchanges since 1987. Any successful organization must secure funding sources to implement programs and activities. Unfortunately, the fund-raising subcommittee has not been active, and has not been able to generate funds for BKA.⁷

Economic development is the process of creating a financial base within an existing community base in order to create new jobs, enhance prosperity, and promote self-sufficiency. In order to achieve this goal, a creative financing proposal was submitted to the Economic subcommittee and the Employment subcommittee by The Rosalind Pie Corporation. The corporation would sell pies to Korean and African American merchants in South Central Los Angeles. It was proposed that the corporation would set aside 50 cents per case, and one dollar after 6,000 cases for a South Central Los Angeles Trust Fund. According to the proposal, twenty part-time employees (African American youth) in Korean owned businesses would be hired, and the corporation would establish a scholarship from the fund. It was supposed to be a mutually beneficial plan since it would provide employment opportunity for many African American youths in South Central Los Angeles. From the company's point of view, the plan would open up a new and viable market in South Central Los Angeles. Unfortunately, this proposal never got off the ground because of lack of interest and lack of manpower to implement this plan.

Problems and Prospects

The BKA has accomplished many of its goals and objectives despite these shortcomings. The BKA has played a vital role as an information clearing house and referral agency, mediating disputes, educating its members, and providing crime prevention seminars and educating elected officials about current issues. In spite of these positive functions, the BKA faced many problems.

Although several attempts were made to recruit Korean merchants and African American residents of South Central Los Angeles, these key players are missing from the active membership. As a result, many BKA sponsored programs suffered from low participation rate. For example, the crime prevention seminar on October 26, 1988 drew less than 10 Korean merchants.⁸

⁷The BKA has received \$4,000 from the Korean Trinity Catholic Mission Church which was spent for an Easter Project in 1988.

⁸The crime prevention seminar held at Los Angeles city councilman's office located at Ver-

The Christmas food-basket program in 1987 attracted far less African American residents than the organizers had hoped for. Organizers had high expectations for the "Korean-African American Friendship Cultural Festival" which was to celebrate the "Day of Korean and African American Community" declared by the city of Compton on March 9, 1985. Korean and African American community leaders predicted that at least 2,000 African Americans and 1,000 Koreans would participate. However, it only drew 100 African Americans and 800 Koreans. Lack of publicity, an internal split within the African American community, and suspicion of the Korean gesture by some African Americans were blamed for the low turnout of African American residents for the festival.

One of the most critical problem of the BKA is the lack of financial resources. The BKA has no operational budget nor paid staff. Two staff members of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission have diligently worked to maintain and continue various activities of the BKA. However, two staff members of the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission cannot assume a leadership role because LAHRC is not an advocacy agency. They can only provide support services to the BKA. Plagued by limited financial and human resources, the BKA was forced to restructure the subcommittees and abolished all but two subcommittees: Religious and Economic Development. In addition, the BKA has modified its original purposes, and decided to include "mediation" as a viable and important function, and established a "mediation" subcommittee. In the past, the BKA had made a conscious decision not to get involve in the "mediation" of disputes. But, several members raised serious concerns and urgent needs to intervene in the increasing level of individual disputes between Korean merchants and African American patrons.

Internal Disorganization

A serious communication problems and misunderstanding between the BKA members sometimes has hampered the coalition efforts of the BKA. "The early meetings were a time when two ethnocentric groups were forced to come together," said Jai Lee Wong of Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission. For example, several African American members of the BKA expressed a strong negative feeling towards the presence of Korean merchants in their neighborhood. Reverend H. P. Rachel, a co-chair of

mont and Manchester in 1987. It was relatively successful with more than 30 Korean merchants participating. It was a direct result of an active effort on the part of a Los Angeles Korean-speaking police officer who went to each store and encouraged merchants to come to the seminar.

BKA, advocated the boycott of discourteous Korean stores. Other African American members voiced their ethnocentrism accusing Korean merchants of "ripping off the African American community." African American and Korean members advocated their own issues and defended their people. Some BKA members were more interested in promoting their own agenda than working together to solve problems.

In another instance, an African American member angrily raised a question: "When are you (Koreans) going to open the bank on Vermont and Manchester (South Central Los Angeles) area?" This statement implied that Koreans must take responsibility for improving the economically depressed community of the South Central Los Angeles by opening up a bank to serve African American community. Korean members made it clear that Korean merchants did not have this responsibility nor the resources to establish a bank.⁹

As we have seen, Korean members tended to be "defensive," while African American members were "offensive" because of the nature of the conflict. Some Korean members expressed resentment toward the constant demands from the African Americans. One Korean member angrily replied that "it is not a Korean problem but a problem of South Central Los Angeles. Korean merchants happen to be there. We must learn to live together instead of pushing for more."

Two meetings were set up to discuss problems and alleviate internal frictions within the BKA membership. First, they found that the lack of interpersonal relations resulted in uncomfortable feelings between Korean and African American members. Members were not frank about discussing *negative* feelings and perceptions of each other. Some Korean members expressed their concern that some African American members felt superior to Korean members because of their longer history in the United States.¹⁰ In order to facilitate mutual understanding, members were encouraged to let to know each other on a personal level.

Second, some members lacked clear understanding about the mission of the BKA because of constant turn-over of members. Many new members did not understand the directions of the BKA. As a result, many new African American members received misinformation of Korean merchants, and sometimes this resulted in an angry exchange of words with Korean members. "Mythun-

⁹During the past few years, several major banks have closed their branches in South Central Los Angeles. In particular, African American merchants have raised concerns that they must drive longer distances since there are no nearby banks to serve them. Against this background, the debate concerning the establishment of a bank by Koreans was raised.

¹⁰This feeling may be due to the language problems of Korean members and their inability to communicate effectively with African American members.

derstanding” of Korean merchants were particularly widespread about the issue of how and where Koreans got their money to start a business. “Koreans have been here for only five years, but they are doing much better than African Americans who have been here for 200 years. Koreans must be getting special help from the government at the expense of African Americans.”¹¹ “Mythunderstanding” within the BKA can be attributed to weak leadership. The BKA must set realistic goals based on an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. In this regard, one of the most immediate priorities should be to raise sufficient funds to hire a full-time staff person and implement various programs.

CHURCHES

Korean Americans and African Americans are predominantly Christians. In fact, Korea is one of the few nations in the world that Christianity has actually prospered during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. Historically speaking, the Korean church in America was the center of independence activities against Japanese imperialism during the turn of the century (Choy 1979). Today, Korean churches still function as the most important and numerous social and religious institution serving the immigrant community. In order to help promote common experiences between the two groups, several African American community leaders were invited to visit South Korea in 1985. By taking the trip, they could learn about Korean culture, customs, history, and society so that they could relay what they saw, heard, and experienced to their congregational members.¹²

African American ministers have played an indispensable role in advocating economic, political and social justice and equality for African Americans. “African American religion has served to reinforce survival of the African American community, stability in the wider social system, upward mobility of minority persons into that system, as well as social change, political protest and resistance, and even revolutionary activities (Tinney 1977, p. 36).”

Given historical and functional similarities of Korean and African American churches, cooperation between African American and Korean American

¹¹In the beginning (early 1980s), rumors were circulated that the Korean government and/or Reverend Moon was financing the initial capital of many Korean small businesses in the United States. These accusations were totally false.

¹²Reverend Jin-Koo Lee of the “Compton Fashion Swap Meet Church” also endorsed this kind of program. Reverend Lee stated that he is planning to start an exchange program by inviting at least one or two African American theology students to study in Korea for one year. Then, they can educate and share what they have learned with their congregation members. “Koreans cannot educate African Americans or vice versa. African American problems must be resolved by African Americans themselves.”

churches seem natural and inevitable. BKA encouraged exchange programs to promote harmony, mutual understanding, and brotherhood through an exchange of choirs, joint services, pastoral discussion groups, camps, and conferences. The Oriental Mission Church has been the most active Korean church under the leadership of Reverend Dong-Sun Lim.¹³ In February 1984, the first Korean and African American joint service was held at the Oriental Mission Church. The following year, the Oriental Mission Church again sponsored a joint service by inviting the 70-member choir of the Little Zion Baptist Church of Compton. The Reverend Jerome Fisher declared, "This is a great opportunity to change the history of our two communities. We've just ushered in a new era of unity. In Korea, African American and Korean soldiers died together, and I say if we can die together we should be able to live together" (*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, February 11, 1985). The Oriental Mission Church also presented \$5,000 scholarship to African American students.¹⁴

There have been other attempts to promote cooperation between the two communities. One of the plan called for 200 Korean and 200 African American churches to form a sister relationship and engage in choir exchanges, joint services, and cultural exchange programs. Korean-African American joint Easter Sunday service was a great success. It was held Sunday, April 7, 1985, 5 a.m. at McArthur Park near Koreatown in Los Angeles to promote interracial fellowship. With more than 130 Korean and African American churches attending, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and Compton city Mayor Tucker also attended the Easter Sunday service. Since then, there have been many Korean-African American joint services.¹⁵

As we have seen, Korean and African American churches have shown an effort to hold interracial fellowship gatherings since 1985. However, some Korean community leaders raised concern that these programs have done very little to alleviate tensions. Reverend Young-Whan Kim said that "the Korean church has obligations and responsibilities to mediate conflicts between Korean merchants and African American residents. The relationship should be that of mutual sharing and participation instead of Korean churches and organizations always 'giving' to the African American community in the form of scholarships or a *bulgoki parky*" (*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, March 25, 1987). These concerns were main topic of discussion at the Ethnic Ministries for the

¹³The Oriental Mission Church is one of the largest, if not the largest, Korean church in Los Angeles (and probably in the United States).

¹⁴Two students from the Great New Unity Baptist Church and three students from the Little Zion Baptist Church received scholarship of \$1,000 each. Since then, the Oriental Mission Church has awarded several scholarships to African American students every year.

¹⁵There were five Korean-African American joint services and choir exchange programs in 1986 alone.

California and Pacific Conference. Director of the center, Robert Habershaw, proposed discussion on the following questions: how African American and Korean ministers feel about Korean-African American relations? How lay people feel about Korean-African American relations? How far are they willing to go in addressing this issue (*Korea Times*, August 12, 1986)?

There are many obstacles for Korean and African American churches to overcome if they indeed want to build mutual respect and feelings of brotherhood. "Theological and political conservatism characterizes the ideology of mainstream Korean Christianity (Clark 1986, p. 22)." This conservatism comes from the pietistic religious tradition introduced by the Protestant missionaries. What differentiates African American churches from Korean churches is the former tend to be religiously conservative or evangelical, but they always have been politically "progressive" and "liberal."¹⁶ "African American religion has at various times and places supported electoral politics, racial politics, coalition politics, nationalist politics, developmental politics, policy politics, and Marxist-Socialist politics (Tinney 1977, p. 38)." Cone (1972, p. 40) provides the biblical justification for the African American church's activist role: "God's involvement in the liberation of oppressed people." Doubts exist if it is possible to build coalitions based upon the Christian love of Korean and African American churches.

Besides efforts by the BKA and churches, individual Korean merchants have tried their best to improve relationships with their customers. For example, King Indoor Swap Meet invited 1,500 neighborhood residents to a Thanksgiving Korean dinner party, and they also contributed a scholarship to Manuel Art High school (*Dong-A Ilbo*, November 29, 1986). The Slauson Indoor Swap Meet also supported African American community organizations and programs. "We support our community where we do business" is the slogan of the Slauson Indoor Swap Meet. Major donations were made to several local community agencies that include the Youth Gang Service, the People who care Youth Center, the Local Explorer Scouts, the Crenshaw High School Scholarship, Jesse Jackson 1988 Presidential Campaign.

Unfortunately, these attempts by the BKA, churches, and individual merchants have had little impact on improving the Korean-African American relationship. Programs such as joint church services, a *bulgoki* party, and scholarships failed to address the root causes of the conflicts. As a result, the Korean-African American relationships further deteriorated, and it still remains a potentially explosive situation.

¹⁶Some prominent leaders of the African American civil rights movement included Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Jesse Jackson. They advocated activism to abolish the evil of racial discrimination and to achieve racial and economic equality for all.

THE BRADLEY ADMINISTRATION

The Jackson survey (1988) found that "Mayor Tom Bradley serves as a symbol of access to city hall even if it's more an illusion than a reality."¹⁷ Although mayor Tom Bradley has been a mayor of the city for the past sixteen years, the average welfare of African American Americans in Los Angeles has improved very little. In fact, socio-economic conditions of the South Central Los Angeles has worsened since the 1960s (Ong *et al.* 1988). Deteriorating parks, unsafe streets, crime, and drug trafficking still remain high on the agenda of problems to be solved for African Americans (Jackson 1988). And yet, Los Angeles African Americans have supported the Bradley growth machine in hope of receiving jobs and economic advancement. For example, 60 percent of African American residents supported Tom Bradley's pro-growth stand, compared to only 29 percent of city-wide residents (Jackson 1988, p. 9).

Mayor Bradley has made token "political gestures" by sponsoring two breakfast meetings, but he has not made any formal and concrete financial commitments to improve the worsening Korean-African American relations. Mayor Bradley hosted a breakfast meeting on April 19, 1987 to discuss ways to promote better understanding between the Korean and African American communities. Raymond Johnson, president of the NAACP, commented that "the meeting was informative. I don't think the meeting accomplished anything except to bring representatives for a cordial introduction (and) to set the stage for a serious dialogue (*Korea Times*, April 25, 1987)."

It took another two-and-half years to hold a "second" (not necessarily a follow-up) get-together breakfast meeting hosted by Mayor Bradley on October 5, 1989.¹⁸ The purpose of the second meeting was to seek ways to promote joint ventures between Korean and African American businessmen which was sponsored by the BKA. Approximately thirty Korean and African American businessmen, BKA members and reporters attended the breakfast meeting. These meetings failed to produce any concrete projects or programs to alleviate tensions between the two communities.

Although the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission has provided two staff members to the BKA, the Los Angeles City Human Relations

¹⁷"Los Angeles Racial Group Consciousness and Political Behavior Survey" was conducted by Byron Jackson of California State University, Los Angeles in 1988. For detail of this survey see Chang (1990).

¹⁸Persistent efforts by the BKA resulted in the second breakfast meeting on October 5, 1989. Due to staff inefficiency, lack of commitment from city hall and a political scandal involving the Mayor, the meeting was delayed several months.

Commission has not sent representatives to BKA meetings until recently. When Bradley sent his representatives to a BKA meeting, the person lacked the sense of commitment and professionalism. The mayor's representatives often came late, arriving when meetings were almost over, if they arrived at all. It was very obvious to this researcher that they came to the BKA meetings because they "had to" and not because they "wanted to do something." In final analysis, Mayor Bradley has not made firm substantive commitments to improve inter-ethnic relations other than his usual political speeches.

Antagonism toward Korean merchants by African American residents still runs high. Since one of the root causes of the Korean-African American conflict lies with economic problems of South Central Los Angeles, this problem will not go away unless drastic measures are taken to improve the worsening economic conditions in the area, or Korean merchants will choose to completely move out of the area. It is highly unlikely that either will occur in the near future. The economic deprivation of South Central Los Angeles is not a local problem but a built-in structural problem of American capitalism. It is a chronic problem that can not be solved by band-aid measures (Piven and Cloward 1971). Unfortunately, government support for domestic social welfare programs has been cut drastically during the Reagan-Bush administration (1980-present). Unless the government is willing to invest heavily into the community in the form of providing better education, employment opportunities, investment capital, housing, transportation, and health services for residents of South Central, the situation will not improve in the near future.

Korean merchants will not be able to move out of the area unless they can sell their stores to non-Koreans or African American buyers. So far, no one, except other Korean immigrants, is willing to buy businesses in African American areas.¹⁹ Very few African Americans have enough investment capital to purchase stores from Koreans because of the prices of businesses in African American neighborhood have increased sharply due to increasing demands and rising real estate costs in Southern California. The best we can hope for is to minimize the tension and promote harmony and peaceful co-existence. It will require coordinated efforts by Korean merchants, African American residents, community organizations, and government agencies to reduce tensions between two minority groups in the areas by focusing on: prevention, intervention, and minority coalition building.

¹⁹Southeast Asian refugees have begun to set up businesses in South Central Los Angeles in recent years. Since Southeast Asian refugees overcome so many obstacles and life-threatening situations, they are willing to take risks to make it in America.

PREVENTION, INTERVENTION, AND MEDIATION

Prevention often is the best way to solve the problems. To prevent and improve inter-ethnic relations in South Central Los Angeles, economic conditions must be improved to create more job opportunities for African American youth. African Americans have been victims of racial oppression for a long time. Therefore, they are often suspicious of "outsiders." Whether this suspicion toward Korean merchants is warranted or not, distrust of "outsiders" will continue to prevail and cause conflicts. Unless the economic conditions improve, antagonism toward Korean merchants will persist. Korean merchants, along with leaders of African American community, must take pro active steps to create a positive atmosphere. Korean merchants can take more responsibility by contributing to African American organizations or the community, by hiring more African American employees, by not overcharging, and by treating customers with respect. At the same time, African American patrons must not blame and use them as a scapegoat of deteriorating socio-economic conditions of African American community.

Even if efforts are made to prevent conflicts, individual disputes between Korean merchants and African American customers will continue to escalate. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) have recognized the importance of the mediation process, and established a "dispute resolution center" in 1989. The "dispute resolution center" handles disputes between tenant/landlord, neighbor/neighbor, consumer/merchant, employer/employee, business formation and dissolution, divorce, custody, child support, etc.. Mediation is "the intervention into a dispute or negotiation by an acceptable, impartial, and neutral party who has no authoritative decision-making power and who is there to assist disputing parties in voluntarily reaching their own mutually acceptable settlement of issues in dispute."²⁰

Mediation is a non-violent, quick, effective, and inexpensive way to resolve disputes and bring a positive change. Many of the merchant-consumer disputes can be effectively resolved through the process of mediation if it is readily available in neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles. However, a mediation center requires adequately trained mediators, space, and operational expenses. Since there are many empty, low-rent office spaces in South Central Los Angeles, finding a location for a dispute resolution center should not be a major problem. For example, a large indoor swap meet can provide

²⁰Federal Mediation Board volunteer mediator training manual.

a space for a dispute resolution center for low-rent or even rent-free.²¹ Since the dispute resolution center could handle the customer complaints of both indoor swap meet vendors and those in nearby stores, it is mutually beneficial for Korean merchants, African American customers, and the indoor swap meet vendors. In addition, many existing community-based organizations, such as the NAACP, the Urban League, or churches, could provide office space for a dispute resolution center.

The Korean-African American dispute probably will require co-mediation by both Korean and African American mediators because of the built-in bias of disputants toward one another. Although a dispute may involve economic issues, *race* may play an important role determining the success or failure of mediation. Therefore, it would require Korean and African American mediators to work together as a team. Mediation is an art in itself. Only "mediators" who are well trained and qualified can successfully mediate disputes. It costs a lot to train qualified mediators to resolve disputes. Korean merchants who have a direct interest in resolving disputes should contribute funds to train and hire qualified mediators. The government also could provide technical and financial assistance to the mediation center.

Currently, both the SCLC and APALC dispute resolution centers rely upon volunteer mediators to handle the cases. Although many volunteers are committed and dedicated to the cause, there is a limitation in what they can do as volunteers. In order to bring stability and credibility to the dispute resolution centers, the centers need to hire several paid staff members and set up a formal system to resolve disputes. Funding for the establishment and operation of the centers must come from many different sources: the public and private sectors, businessmen, and the community.

The government must be willing to take a major share of the burden by providing technical support as well as financial assistance. Moreover, businessmen have an interest in setting up the dispute resolution center because they can benefit directly in the long run. It is in their self-interest to make financial contributions to the dispute resolution center. In order to facilitate participation from the business community, a neighborhood dispute resolution center should adopt a membership system. Businesses that become members of the center would pay monthly dues, but also could use the center to resolve disputes with customers at reduced rates or free of charge.

²¹The dispute between OMNI and the Slauson Indoor Swap Meet reached a peaceful settlement when the Swap Meets agreed to develop a customer service complaint system and hire an African American customer service representative. Although different from the dispute resolution center, the "customer service complaint system" serves similar functions.

BUILDING MINORITY COALITIONS

During the civil rights movement, many saw white-African American coalition was seen as the most viable option. Some favored African American-White coalitions of the poor, while others argued for coalitions of all (Henry 1980). Because of dramatic demographic shifts in major urban areas of the United States (Los Angeles in particular), the prospects for minority coalitions seem more realistic today than coalitions involving the white power structure.

In order to build an effective coalition among racial minorities (Korean-African American in this case), certain economic, political, and ideological pre-conditions must exist. In fact, the building of minority coalitions in the economic and political arenas may solve many of the existing problems between the Korean and African American communities. The success of a minority coalition will also depend upon how well it is able to minimize differences while maximizing commonalities.

Indeed, Koreans and African Americans have many common grounds for coalition building, and they must accept the other as a partner. As racial and ethnic minorities, they share a common reason to unite and fight together against racial discrimination, bigotry, and violence. Koreans and African Americans share a common history of oppression and exploitation. "History of Suffering" is probably a very accurate description for both Korean and African Americans.²²

Koreans and African Americans also share common cultural characteristics. They are very affectionate and emotional, and are people with deep feelings. "Once you get to know your African American customers, you can really be a good friend with them. I don't know if that is possible with white people."²³ Koreans and African Americans also share a tradition of an "extended family" system, much more so than white Americans. In contrast to the typical middle class American "nuclear family," Korean and African American families include aunts, uncles, in-laws and other relatives. The Confucian tradition of the Korean family and the value structure of the urban

²²Korea suffered from the numerous invasions by Chinese, Manchu, Japanese, and other neighbors throughout the history. In recent years, Korea was colonized by Japan from 1910 to 1945. Ham Sok Hon, one of the most respected Korean philosophers in Korea, summed up Korean history as a "History of Suffering" in his book *Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea*, translated by E. Sang Yu, Friends World Committee For Consultation, 1985.

²³Interestingly, many Korean merchants told me that they view whites as being rational, cold and calculative. On the other hand, African Americans, like Koreans, sometimes act according to their moods or feelings even if these could bring negative consequences.

African American family both place importance on cooperation and networking among kin members.²⁴ There is a strong possibility that they will get along and share a feeling of "brotherhood."

Christianity (Protestantism) also binds Koreans and African Americans together. The overwhelming majority of Korean immigrants and African Americans are church-goers. Although there are problems involving denominational splits, and conservatism and/or liberalism within the church, the spirit of Christian "love" can serve as a basis for mutual admiration and understanding between Koreans and African Americans. Leadership of Korean and African American churches must show desire and willingness to set aside religious and ideological differences in search of common ground. The potential for building coalitions exists between Korean Americans and African Americans. How to build these coalitions is the major issue facing us today.

Confrontational tactics such as "boycotts," the "Buy Freedom Campaign,"²⁵ or the "Stop Selling America" proposal should be avoided in favor of partnership, cooperation and unity. African Americans are suspicious of Koreans because they are the latest in the long line of "outsiders" who came into African American neighborhoods to exploit them. But, unlike the Jewish-African American encounter of earlier years, the Korean-African American relationship of the 1980s is not a dominant-subordinate relationship.²⁶ Both Koreans and African Americans must learn to respect each other.

Korea is a homogeneous society whose unity is deeply rooted in common language, culture, tradition, custom, and history. As a result, Koreans are a highly egoistic, and self-centered people. Koreans are not used to living in a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society, and they tend to be very rude to people "outside" of their family or people they do not know. In order to build coalitions, Koreans must learn how to live with others and show respect for African Americans. By the same token, African Americans must be willing to accept Korean Americans as their coalitional partner.

Building Korean-African American coalitions is a very difficult process because there is no single centralized representative organization in the African American community. The Korean American community also faces the same problem, but to the lesser extent. The Korean Federation of Southern Cali-

²⁴For information on urban African American kinship networking, see Stack (1974).

²⁵The "Buy Freedom Campaign" was initiated by television journalist Tony Brown in 1986 and encourages African American consumers to spend their dollars at African American-owned businesses to create more jobs and promote business opportunities within the community.

²⁶See Chang (1993). White-African American relations is often described as majority-minority. However, the dominant-subordinate relationships better describe the relationship between whites and African Americans.

ifornia (Korean Association) can claim to represent all Koreans of Southern California. Although it is highly questionable whether the Korean Federation can properly represent the community, it still is recognized as a representative organization of the Korean community.

I argue that the African American-Korean coalition must be a "politically-based" coalition that will be mutually beneficial. The traditional white-African American coalition is based on a paternalistic relationship, while the minority (African American-Korean) coalition must be based upon egalitarian relationship. Historically speaking, the white power structure has been able to "divide and rule" the various minority groups because the minority groups often fought amongst themselves. However, this in-fighting can be offset if minorities realize that there are greater benefits in a minority coalition. Since minorities now constitute the "new majority" in the city of Los Angeles, they can truly turn their numbers into a political power base. The possibility of controlling local politics is great if Asian, African American and Latino groups understand the advantages of building coalitions. They no longer have to fight for "a piece of the pie." Instead, they can share power amongst themselves. In a traditional race relations paradigm, competition for scarce resources shapes a conflictual racial and ethnic relationship. However, today there are prospects for a new race relations paradigm, whereby a minority coalition can create a cooperative relationship. Minority groups hold the key to establishing their own political and economic power.

CONCLUSION

The real challenges for Koreans and African Americans is how to build coalitions by maximizing commonalties while minimizing differences. It will take solid leadership and cooperation to realize the final goal of achieving peace and harmony between the two communities. The sharing of power, privileges, and status among different racial and ethnic groups probably will be the most pressing issue facing urban areas in the decade of the 1990s. If Koreans (Asians), African Americans and Latinos can build a coalition and join with whites (the Rainbow Coalition), the United States will truly become a multi-racial society. In addition, the local, state, and federal government must be willing to invest human and financial capital to revitalize socio-economic conditions of African American neighborhoods. Equally important is that the mass media must assume direct responsibility for educating the public by launching campaigns to promote mutual understandings and cooperation between different racial and ethnic groups.

In conclusion, the BKA has been the most effective organization in reducing tensions between Koreans and African Americans. Unlike other major

cities, Los Angeles did not experience major clashes between Korean merchants and African American residents until 1991. When problems arose, the BKA was quick to mediate the situation. Implementation of BKA programs can have a major impact on the reduction of tensions between the two groups. Despite attempts, tension escalated in 1991 when two African Americans were shot and killed by Korean merchants. Why and how did it happen? We must learn from the failure of the BKA to prevent tragedies and escalation of tensions in order not to make same mistakes. The region urgently needs a central unit, such as the BKA, that can serve not only as a facilitator but also take primary responsibility for coordinating and implementing programs. The public and private sectors should provide financial and personnel resources, and other necessary support to build this central unit. It will take the full commitments by the Korean and African American community, as well as the support of local, state, and federal government agencies to address this very volatile issue. If this experiment can succeed in Los Angeles, it could be used as a model across the nation to help Korean merchants and African American residents live together in harmony. The challenge for all of us is not *what* to do but *how* to do it. We must implement these programs to ease tensions and improve relationships between Koreans and African Americans.

Koreans and African Americans share many common features. Therefore, there is a strong likelihood that they can form an alliance to turn a conflictual relationship into a cooperative relationship. Fortunately, various agencies and organizations in Asian and African American communities have begun to address the issue of mediation. The "Dispute Resolution Center" can play a critical role in reducing individual disputes between Korean merchants and African American residents. Building minority coalitions probably is the only way for Korean and African Americans, along with other ethnic groups, to live peacefully together in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-racial society.

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