African Migrant Workers' Views of Korean People and Culture

Han Geon-Soo

Abstract

The globalization process changed the context and contents of intercultural communications and mutual understandings. The discourse on Korean culture and Koreanness has been constructed through Western perspectives. Recently, they have also begun to consider Chinese and Japanese views on Korean culture. The globalization process, however, enables other perspectives, such as those of Southeast Asian and African peoples, to contribute to the discourse on Korean culture and Koreanness. This paper introduces how African migrant workers understand and interpret Korean culture from their perspective. African workers who have more traditional values concerning the community, family, and society provide a different evaluation of Korean culture and society. Korean people have represented Korean culture as upholding Confucian values and a well-preserved community spirit. African migrant workers, however, have diagnosed that Korean society has already lost the traditional values of the community in many social aspects. In addition, their different view on Korean culture forces us to reconsider the given discourse on Koreanness and the context of cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: Korean culture, Koreanness, African migrant workers, cross-cultural communication, globalization

Han Geon-Soo (Han, Geon-su) is Full Time Lecturer of Cultural Anthropology at Kangwon National University. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley in 2000. His research interests include ethnicity, identity politics, social memory, diaspora, migrant workers, and African Studies. He has authored *Contesting Narratives of the Past: Social Memory and the Politics of Difference* (in Korean) (2002) and *Language Use and Ethnic Identity in Nigeria: Yoruba Language and the Politics of Identity* (in Korean) (2001). E-Mail: yoruba@kangwon.ac.kr.

Introduction

One hot and humid afternoon in September of 1996, I was trying to persuade a Yoruba passenger sitting next to me in an old station wagon taxi not to call me an "Oyinbo." During the entire period of my fieldwork in Nigeria, I was called an "Oyinbo" which means white man or European in the Yoruba language. Even the Nigerian academics called me an "Oyinbo." This identification made me very uncomfortable because I had been categorized in America as Asian and not as white. The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 had especially awakened my racial and ethnic identity in America. In addition to this, I was the only Asian scholar at many academic or public conferences on African studies. Quite often, I received questions on the reason for my presence there. This situation increased my awareness of my own ethnic and racial identity in the academic community of African Studies. As an Asian foreign student specializing in African culture and society in American academia, I had tried to form an alternative perspective based on my independent identity, being neither white nor black, neither an agent nor a victim of the slave trade and colonialism. I was fully aware of native African scholars' criticism of European scholarship and knowledge on Africa (Appiah 1992; Mudimbe 1988, 1994; Owusu 1978), and therefore had a strong desire to solidify my alternative identity and perspective in African studies.

As soon as I arrived in Africa, however, I began to be called a white man. In the street, it was normal for children to follow me shouting "Oyinbo pepe!" and for adults to greet me as "Oyinbo!" with a smile. Especially when Nigerian scholars called me an "Oyinbo," I felt as if my intention to be an Asian scholar with an alternative perspective was being thwarted by the African people. As a result, I tried to persuade and argue my racial identity whenever I was called an "Oyinbo."

Returning to my conversation with the passenger in the car, the man would not accept the argument I gave him and stretched his arms out to compare our skin colors. He explained that his skin color was black and mine white. I disagreed with his color description

arguing that my skin color was yellow, not white. However, he would not accept my explanation. He simply told me, “Yours is lighter than mine.”

The passenger, then, shifted the topic of conversation to religion, asking me if I was Christian or Muslim. His intention was actually to find out if I was a born-again Christian. He differentiated “nominal Christians” from “born-again Christians.” According to him, a churchgoer who has not had the spiritual experience of being born-again is not real Christian. He is a “nominal Christian” and can not be differentiated from non-believers in everyday life. After a long sermon with biblical verses and explanations about the different lifestyles of born-again Christians, he challenged me to become a born-again Christian, or a real Christian. In his final remarks, he suddenly recounted my arguments that had emphasized my Korean nationality. He had not taken my nationality seriously during our entire conversation, but at this moment, he remembered it and asked me if I knew Reverend Jo Yong-gi.[1] I was surprised to hear his name, partly because I had not expected to hear a famous Korean pastor’s name in a small African town and partly because a Nigerian, insisting my racial identity was white, suddenly applied a Korean element to me. Because of the tenuous link to this charismatic Korean Pentecostal church pastor, my Korean nationality at last meant something to him. He concluded our long conversation by saying, “Reverend Jo Yong-gi is a powerful man. I read about him and his church. You should be born-again. You are from Jo Yong-gi’s country.”

This conversation illustrates that when we define our identities, even racial and ethnic ones, we tend to select different elements to construct our own and others’ identities. For my Nigerian companion, I was a white man and because of my lighter skin, my Korean nationality was not meaningful for his discussion. When he shifted to

1. A charismatic pastor of the Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea. His church is famous for having the largest number of members in the world. The Full Gospel Church announced that it had 700,000 members in 1990. Most Pentecostal church members I met in Nigeria knew about the Full Gospel Church and Reverend Jo Yong-gi.

my religious identity, however, because of one charismatic Korean pastor, my Korean nationality became important. During the year-long fieldwork, my social identities (including ethnic and racial ones) were constructed through endless negotiation with various Nigerians. To a majority of the people I met, I was an Oyinbo; to the college students who had watched Chinese movies on videotape, I was Jackie Chan (a Hong Kong martial arts actor); to the Nigerian academics, I was the graduate student from America who had more “authority” and “access” to powerful or trendy academic language; to U.S. Embassy personnel, I was the foreign student who did not have American citizenship; to Nigerian female college students who wanted to escape the hard life in their home country, I was a possible ticket to the United States until they found out I was not an American citizen; to Nigerians who had business with either South or North Korea, I was the South Korean. And finally, to the chief of the village where I conducted research, I was the bothersome South Korean because he had made efforts to attract North Korean investment for ten years and was using these efforts to maintain his political power.

This experience made me reconsider the process of constructing a theory of Korean culture within the context of globalization. Defining and understanding other cultures has a similar structure with the process of negotiating identity. Foreigners do not always accept the theories about Korean culture as Korean people have constructed and defined them. In the same way that my Nigerian companion did not accept my skin color and nationality, foreigners do not agree with the features of Korean culture that Korean people emphasize. They interpret and understand Korean culture based on their own foreign perspectives. Keeping this point in mind, I would like to emphasize the necessity of thinking about Korean culture in the context of interaction with others. Koreans need to consider how foreigners perceive and understand Korean culture.

For this purpose, I will examine African people’s understanding and interpretation of Korean people and culture. Koreans have mainly been concerned about what European and American people think

about Korea and Korean culture, and sometimes the Japanese and the Chinese as well. They are not concerned, however, with African people's interpretation of Korean culture. It is partially because of the lack of interaction and cultural communication between Korea and the countries of Africa. Koreans think that people in Africa do not have meaningful knowledge of Korean culture and that they do not need to pay attention to their opinions. I believe, however, that we need to treat African people's opinions more seriously because as I mentioned above, the globalization process enables African people to contribute to the construction of knowledge and interpretation of Korean culture. In addition, African people can offer a different point of view on and a different interpretation of Korean culture because they have not been as influenced by Westernization.

"Invention of Africa": How do Koreans View Africa?

Korea and Africa

The relationship between Korea and African countries is limited economically and politically. During the Cold War, the South Korean government paid more attention to the African countries, because of political competition against North Korea in the United Nations. After the end of the Cold War, the South Korean government did not feel any necessity to strengthen political relationships with African countries. Economic relationships since then have not developed further either. Direct Korean investment in Africa has been decreasing since the 1980s. The direct investment rate was at 17.4% in 1980, focusing mainly on the mine industry to secure natural resources. However, the investment rate has been stagnating since 1981 at 2-3%, except for an increase to 4.94% in 1994. It decreased to below 1% in 1999 and to 0.55% in 2000. Most of these investments have been concentrated on North African countries and South Africa. We can say that there is almost no investment in the sub-Saharan African countries (Sin 2000, 62-71). Most of the major Korean companies neither invest nor have plans to make inroads into African markets. Daewoo and Hyundai were two of the small number of companies to invest in the automobile industry in Nigeria and Botswana in the 1990s. Recently, the construction sector has newly emerged as business for Korean companies such as Daewoo and SK. In these situations, individual traders and small business owners play main roles in the economic interaction between African countries and Korea. The Lebanese merchants who migrated into West Africa and run various businesses there import automobile and electronic goods from Korea. They, however, have not contributed to the improvement of economic relationships between African countries and Korea. Rather, individual African traders, trading cheap machinery, clothes, automobile parts, and other consumer products, are eager to find and import new products from Korea. During my fieldwork in Nigeria, it was not difficult to find Korean products such as cookies, chewing gum, tires and other automobile parts, and used cars. In 1995, Nigeria imported Korean products amounting to US$203.3 million from Korea and exported crude oil amounting to US$353.8 million to Korea. While Korea mainly imported crude oil from Nigeria, Nigeria imported various products from Korea. In the process, Korean traders and businessmen visited Nigeria less often than Nigerian traders frequented Korea.

Image of Africa

There are few Koreans who have actually visited African countries. Most of them have visited either Kenya or South Africa on a safari tour. Other Koreans do not have direct experience or knowledge of Africa. They construct images of Africa based on mass media and other people's experiences. Africa has been described as "primitive," "savage," or "the source of life" in Korean society (Han 2001). For example, Korean children construct images of Africa through television documentaries featuring the animal kingdom or television dramas produced in Hollywood, such as Tarzan. In these films, Africa is always described as a savannah with freely roaming animals. Recent-

ly one of the popular television comedy programs had a segment titled “Chief of the Savannah” that poked fun at an African chief and his people.[2] In this segment, an African chief and his followers spoke a nonsensical language and such shouted strange sounds as “Pam斤 paya!” This strange sound was the punch line for Koreans to laugh. A comedian who remembered a television documentary of the animal kingdom that he had watched during his childhood made this sound. In this comedy segment, they showed Africans as unintelligible and uncivilized beings. In other settings, Africa is a romantic and abstract space existing in the imagination. It is the place “where all kinds of herbivorous and carnivorous animals live” and “giraffes and hippos play together, elephants uproot trees and drag them, two million flamingos dance with fantastic moves, and Thomson’s gazelles jump and romp” (Kim 1997, 361). In the quoted novel, two young Korean men who are struggling for survival in a competitive job imagine the Serengeti Plain as above. Even though they know about the harsh law of the jungle and the food chain, they romanticize the African plain as a symbol of freedom. The same writer connects this image of Africa to a Nigerian migrant worker in another novel (Kim 1996). He compares a Nigerian migrant worker’s painful life in Korea to his free life in Nigeria. The author describes free life using the metaphor of the plain. Actual Nigerian nature and landscape are not important to him. To this author, all Africans live in the savannah. Through this process, Africa becomes the romantic origin of human beings, where Koreans can discover the meaning of life. Another writer sends his main character, a former revolutionary student activist, to Africa to resolve her suffering of setbacks and frustrations. In the novel, she narrates that Africa might be the last hope for humankind (Bak 1993, 325).

Africa has also been invented through images of famine and ethnic cleansing massacres. Africa is imagined as a place in need of salvation and help. These tragic realities of Africa make people rethink their lives and repent. In one Korean movie, the main characters visit

2 Gaegeu konseoteu (Gag Concert), Korean Broadcasting System (KBS).

a Rwandan refugee camp in Tanzania, a scene with little relevance to the narrative structure as a whole, to realize the meaningless of their lives. The two characters who have run after love and material success suddenly change their lives after a brief visit to the African refugee camp.[3]

This invented image of Africa reaches its peak in one Korean National Assembly member’s official speech. In his suspicious speech on government censorship of Korean media, he states, “It seems our government thinks that our country is a primitive country in Africa.”[4] African countries have become the symbol of primitive civilization and the worst object of comparison for Koreans.

Korean people’s understanding and view of the African continent seem to repeat the European imperialistic gaze of the nineteenth century. Europeans constructed a primitive and barbarous image of Africa to rationalize their colonial rule. African scholars critique of the European knowledge system of Africa can be applied to contemporary Korean people. As Chinua Achebe (1989) has confirmed, this imperialistic view of Africa is a kind of desire to emphasize the superiority of European culture to others by inventing Africa as the ornaments of Europe and the object of denial. In a similar way, Korean people have made Africa as their “Other.” They fulfill their desire in order to enjoy the fruit of having born the hardships of the painful twentieth century. Economic development allows them to create their own “Others” whom they can then compare themselves and treat as objects of pity. While this is now out of fashion in European countries, one can see the same style of European imperialist thought in contemporary Korea.

3 The title of the movie is *Neon sok-e noeul jida* (Sunset into the Neon Lights).
4 *Chosun Ilbo*, 4 October 1999.

How Do Africans View Korean Culture and Society?

Observation in Nigeria

Most Africans do not have deep knowledge of Korean culture and society. Many Nigerians, whom I met during my fieldwork, did not even know about the existence of Korea. Nigerian newspapers often did not differentiate between North and South Korea in their articles. Only "Korea" was stated in reporting about North Korean famine or South Korean economic development. Even when they did specify North or South Korea, because of the lack of explanation of the socio-political situation on the Korean peninsula, there were many newspaper reports with wrong information and misunderstandings. For example, in a Nigerian newspaper article on the North Korean submarine's infiltration in 1996, the article heading simply stated "South Korean Kills 13 North Koreans" without any detailed information. In addition, when they reported the North Korean famine and floods, they often confused it with South Korea. Some wealthy people were able to access CNN and BBC news programs through a satellite dish; however, their knowledge on Korea was limited to accidents and political disorder. A chief of a Nigerian town where I did fieldwork had a satellite dish in his house and he would imitate Korean National Assembly members physically fighting at the town chieftaincy meeting. When he explained the function of a chieftaincy meeting, he emphasized that even though they had different opinions, they discussed the topic to persuade others. The chief finished his explanation by saying, "We never fight like Korean National Assembly members."

There are some intellectuals who are trying to introduce the South Korean economic miracle and recommend Korean economic development policy for Nigeria. They use the South Korean economy as the ideal model to follow; thus, they introduce only the positive side of South Korean society. They emphasize that Korea and Nigeria have similar experiences of colonial exploitation and civil war. For them, Nigeria has a better environment for economic development, since Korea lacks natural resources, while Nigeria has rich natural resources such as oil and various minerals. Nigerian intellectuals point this out and suggest that Nigeria also can achieve miraculous economic development if they carefully study the Korean case. Their purpose for studying Korea is limited to economic development; therefore, they do not pay close attention to Korean culture. Without an academic department and scholars in Korean studies, these intellectuals' writings in newspapers provide the main route for Nigerians to understand Korean culture.

African Migrant Workers' View of Korea

There are more than two thousand migrant workers from Africa in Korea. Most of them are undocumented migrant workers. Because of their legal status, it is not easy to find out their actual numbers. When the Korean government announced a voluntary report program in March of 2002, 2,272 unregistered African migrant workers registered. This is about one percent of all unregistered migrant workers in Korea. According to the government data based on the voluntary report of 2002, there are 336,800 foreign workers and of them 265,848 workers are unregistered. They were from 28 different African countries. If we take into consideration African migrant workers who did not register during that period as well as temporary workers, the number is larger. The Seoul branch of the International Organization for Migration estimated the number of African migrant workers to up to four thousand at its peak. The number increased to its peak between 1995 and 1997, just before the economic crisis. As can be seen on Table 1, Nigeria (1,067), Ghana (647), and Egypt (285) are the major countries of origin.

African migrant workers began to come to Korea in the early 1990s. Reverend Kim Yeong-du, who has counseled African migrant workers since 1990, remembers that the first African migrant workers whom he met had smuggled in through Incheon port in 1990. They worked in Incheon as longshoremen. When their numbers increased, they began to come to Seoul, specifically to Itaewon, where foreign-

Table 1. Voluntarily Reported Unregistered African Migrant Workers (2002)

Nigeria	1,067	Niger	5
Ghana	647	Algeria	5
Egypt	285	Malawi	4
Cameroon	52	Benin	4
Ivory Coast	27	Burkina Faso	4
Uganda	26	Senegal	4
Mali	22	Kenya	4
Ethiopia	19	Sudan	3
Guinea	18	Libya	2
Liberia	18	Sierra Leone	2
South Africa	14	Gabon	1
Togo	11	Lesotho	1
Congo	10	Tanzania	1
Zimbabwe	8		
Tunisia	7	Total	2,271

ers and black people gather. They found jobs through brokers and established African networks in Itaewon. They began to work in the suburbs of Seoul and Gyeonggi-do province.

African migrant workers began to learn about Korea through traders and other migrant workers. Especially in the mid-1990s, African migrant workers returned to their countries from Korea bringing Korean used cars that they had bought from junkyards with their savings. They began to run transportation businesses in Ghana and Nigeria. Their economic success spread the “Korean dream.” A Ghanaian worker told me that he heard that he could make ten thousand US dollars a month in Korea.

Journey to Korea

Carrying the Korean dream, African people came to Korea on short-term business or tourist visas and became migrant workers. While many Asian migrant workers came to Korea at first as “industrial trainees,” African workers followed a different route. This is because

the Korean government does not allocate industrial trainee visa quotas to African countries. The industrial trainee system was introduced to give a “side door” to unskilled workers. The immigration law giving preference to professionals and technical workers prevents low skilled foreign workers from entering Korea. The labor shortage in certain industries and occupations, however, has led the Korean government to introduce a series of patchwork measures to amend the existing immigration program. The government wanted to solve the problem of labor shortage without changing the basic policy that closes the “front door” for unskilled labors. It was officially for teaching and transferring industrial skills to less developed countries, but, despite its name, most industrial trainees worked in the Korean companies as unskilled labors. The Korean government allocated trainees based on ethnic ties, such as ethnic Koreans in China and central Asia, and trading or investment ties with Asian countries. African workers are excluded from this program.

African workers, therefore, came to Korea through personal or informal broker networks. Most of them got information about Korea from their relatives and neighbors who had worked in Korea. Some of them learned about Korea through the news and Korean products such as computer and leading-edge information technologies. To get entrance visas, some African workers prepared an amount of money to prove that the purpose of their trip was business or travel. They entered Korea with short-term visas for trade or travel.

They arrived with very little information on Korea. They did not know anything about the climate, language, or food. African migrant workers remember their long journey and the embarrassment they felt as they transferred flights in various cities and the number of black passengers decreased until there was only one or a few black people left. After they went through the immigration process, if they met other African passengers or people who came to the airport to meet friends, the newcomers followed them. Some others just got into a taxi and asked the driver to go to some place where they could meet other black people. One Nigerian worker told me when the taxi arrived at some place, he saw many black people hanging around in

the street. He was glad to see African brothers and got out of the taxi, but then realized that they were black American solders. Finally he arrived in Itaewon and contacted African migrant workers. While he was staying in a cheap motel (US$10 per day), known as the migrant workers' boarding house, he got his first job in Korea through a broker. Normally, African migrant workers network provided job information and tips for everyday life in Korea to the newcomer.

Most African migrant workers in South Korea are single males. When I surveyed 55 Ghanaian migrant workers, their average age was 33 and most were between their 20s and 40s. Thirty-five percent of them graduated from college and fifteen percent finished technical college, meaning that about half of them had received some kind of a college level education. They had professional jobs in Ghana as teachers, technicians, traders and priests. Many of them (twenty-seven percent) worked as migrant workers in other countries before coming to Korea.

The newcomers began to learn about Korean society through their Korean coworkers and supervisors. Through body language and a few Korean words, they understood their job description and the Korean way of life. African workers, especially from Anglophone countries, watch the AFN channel. When they watch Korean television, they watch soap operas and music programs without understanding the story or the song lyrics. During the week, because they work late, most of them just come home directly after work and sleep. They can go out on Sundays. They participate in religious services. Christian and non-Muslim African workers go to African church where they can meet friends or get job information. Ghanaian workers have a Ghanaian church and collect mail and letters faxed from Ghana at the church. The church also provides the basic functions of a market. Some Ghanaian workers sell prepaid international telephone cards, Ghanaian music CD's, and videotapes. There are several photographers, as well as one videographer. They take pictures to send to their family members. They like to take pictures in front of high story apartment buildings and new cars, because they want to show how they are used to modern life in Korea.

The African migrant workers network can be divided into several groups following national and geographical lines. Nigerian workers built a "Nigerian Base" in Osan-li of Gyeonggi-do province. Ghanaian workers organized the Ghanaian Union Association, and Francophone West African workers constructed their community shelter in the southern part of Gyeonggi-do province. These associations and shelters maintained close relationships with various religious and non-government labor consulting institutions. These voluntary associations provide social spaces for African migrant workers to adjust to and live in an unfamiliar environment.

As they settled down in Korean society, many African migrant workers tried to fulfill their Korean dreams. For example, many Nigerian migrant workers established trade networks with their home country and began to engage in trade instead of working in factories. Some of them now work as local trade agents. They gather and live in Haebangchon near Itaewon where their offices are located. Nigerians have constructed their own social space in Itaewon with Nigerian restaurants, barbershops, and clubs. Ghanaian workers also save their wages and mobilize capital through their family members and business partners in Ghana. They send Korean products, mostly used car and automobile parts, to Ghana. This is called "making a container." One Ghanaian worker made four containers during the three years that he worked. To "make a container" (40 feet long), he spent four million won (US$3,400) to buy four used cars and six million won (US$5,000) for automobile parts. Ghanaian workers spent US$10,000 in average for each container. Sometimes, two or three workers made a container together. Otherwise, Ghanaian workers lent their money to a friend who was making a container and their family members collected money in Ghana from the relatives of the worker who made the container. Most African workers do not bring or send money to their home country. They try to find new business items and buy products for future business. Batolome, a Nigerian worker who is 34 years old and has stayed 6 years, summarized his experiences in Korea:

> I came to Korea in 1997. Korea gives me open vision. Before, in Nigeria, I have short vision concerning life. When I came to Korea, Korea gave me wider vision, taught me how to be in industrial society.

He learned computer skills and founded a computer school in Lagos. He invested his savings to buy computers and other office equipment for his school.

Korean People and Culture through African Migrant Workers' Eyes

African migrant workers have limited knowledge and experiences of Korea. They can have misunderstandings and wrong information about Korea. In addition, their unstable legal status, hierarchical relationship with Korean employers and anger caused by unpaid wages can give them a negative image of Korean society. However as I already introduced in the beginning of this paper, the discourse on Korean culture and Koreanness is being constructed in conversation with these others.

First, these migrant workers point out that Korean people have a strong tendency toward racism. Most of them have experienced discrimination based on their skin color. Whenever they introduce themselves as African, Korean people relate Africa to poverty, famine, and tribal war. African workers told me that many Koreans would not sit near them on the bus and subway. Some bus drivers would not allow them to sit near the driver's seat. They would cover their nose and ask them to sit far away.

> When I got in bus or subway, Koreans never sit with me. Even though my next seat was empty, nobody tried to sit there. One day, when I got in a bus, the bus driver asked me to get off, and another driver sprayed deodorant to me (Moses, 28 years old worker from Mali).

Korean coworkers or supervisors would not accept their suggestions because they came from "primitive" Africa. African workers, regardless of their education and skills, are treated as primitives who are inferior to Koreans. Pastor Owankwi, a Ghanaian seminary student and worker, comes from a prestigious family background. He worked in a small chemical factory in Korea to pay for tuition and living expenses, and had various humiliating experiences. He explained that his sufferings were caused by Korean people's racial discrimination of black people.

Second, African workers feel that Koreans look down on poor countries and their citizens. Many Koreans express their sympathy for African workers by saying "You are so lucky to come to Korea. Now you will not be hungry anymore." They believe that this stereotypical image of Africa has been constructed by the Korean mass media.

> Korean people think that all of Africans are AIDS patients. Korean television reports that AIDS are diffused all over the Africa. Therefore Korean people avoid Africans (Moses, 28 years old worker from Mali).

> Korean television always shows traditional life of Africa. We have also city and industrialized area but Korean television tries to find old, poor, and negative aspects of Africa. Of course, we have our traditional culture. In olden days we did not wear dresses and even nowadays some rural area, we live in traditional way of life. But Korean television wants to show only those one (Acho, 34 years old worker from Cameroon).

The difference in the treatment of African-Americans shows that the negative attitude towards Africans is not solely based on race. In fact, many African workers from Anglophone countries introduce themselves as American. They experience totally different responses from Koreans. One Nigerian worker said, "Koreans adore Americans! American blacks are treated in a different way."

Third, they see Koreans as possessing a very strong sense of national solidarity. They think Koreans love themselves too much. African workers experienced this attitude in many conflict situations.

Newcomers were advised to avoid any conflict with Koreans because regardless of who is right, Koreans never take the side of foreigners. Their labor time is longer than Korean coworkers and they receive lower wages. During lunchtime, African workers have to start work earlier. The Korean government's policy on the issue of migrant workers also favors ethnic Koreans from China and central Asia.

These features seem to be related to the strong national consciousness or ethnic unity of the Korean people. Koreans' unrefined attitude, which can be interpreted as racial discrimination, sometimes does not have racist motivations. Many of their racial comments are simple-minded mistakes. African migrant workers may tend to relate a Korean employer's unfair treatment directly to racism. Koreans need to reconsider various cultural values or practices to see whether some of these can be interpreted as racist.

Fourth, African workers feel that Koreans are selfish and do not care about the minority population of the society. Many Africans observe troubled people begging on the street or the subway; however, they do not see any Koreans trying to help them. African workers compare these experiences to that in their own countries: "In our country, we cannot imagine such a cruel attitude." This can be interpreted to mean that many African workers feel that Korean society already lost community spirit.

Fifth, these migrant workers think that Koreans do not respect the elderly. One Ghanaian worker, around fifty years old, was beaten by his teenage coworkers. He related his experience to young people's indifference toward old people in the subway and bus. According to his logic, it was because Koreans do not care about their elders that the teenage coworkers beat him. They also feel that Korean elders exercise too strong authority over young people. Korean elders suddenly change their tone of voice when they speak to young people. "In Ghana, the elders take care of young people and the young people respect their elders in return." They do not agree that Korean society maintains Confucian values, especially those regarding the attitude of young people toward their elders.

Sixth, Koreans are seen as morally degraded. This image is strong among the Muslim African workers. They indicate that Korean people are very liberal sexually. They construct this image from the mass media. For them, Korean women's makeup and fashion symbolize promiscuous sex lives. Korean coworkers' frequent drinking and their "heroic episodes" of womanizing reconfirm these African migrant workers' negative images of Korean sexual morality. They relate this promiscuous image of Korean people to the materialism of Korean society. They say that Korean society is dominated by materialistic value. In a public meeting of the Ghanaian Union Association, one of the leaders advised newcomers to always dress nicely. He explained that Korean people tend to evaluate a person based on their clothes or outer appearance, and stated, "If you wear nice clothes, even the Korean policemen will not interrogate you."

These comments are interesting because they are the complete opposite of Korean people's evaluation of their own culture. Koreans try to represent Korean culture emphasizing its moral superiority, strong community spirit, and Confucian virtues. However, according to these African migrant workers' perspectives, Korean society lacks community spirit and spiritual values. Korea has become a typical industrialized nation and shares the same social problem as other developed countries.

Seventh, they feel that compared to African societies, Korean people discriminate against women. The status of Korean women appears to be below that of African women. This can be observed in the Korean family. A Ghanaian woman, who is teaching at an international school, observed the discrimination between sons and daughters. There are also interesting observations about the division of roles among couples in small businesses. It seems strange to African workers that the owner's wife controls the money in a business. In their countries, they would not allow their wives to manage their income. Some African workers have difficulty understanding husband and wife relationships with regards to the power of the family head and financial management.

Summary and Conclusion

The African migrant worker's interpretation of Korean culture seems superficial and simplistic. This is perhaps due to their illegal immigrant status, language barrier, and limited access to Korean culture and society. However, their comments are very important to understand the current state of Korean society. Foreigners from Europe and America compare Korean society to their own societies. Therefore they evaluate Korea as a country preserving traditional values and human relationships. They agree with Koreans who represent their culture with Confucian virtues, family- and community-oriented life, and spiritual values over materialistic desires. African migrant workers, however, have different opinions. They compare Korea to their own societies, according to which Korea has developed and achieved significant material success, but has lost much of the traditional culture and way of life.

Korean society is currently going through rapid globalization. The cultural identity of the Korean people is being constructed through various cross-cultural contacts and practices. African migrant workers are one of those agents. Until now, Korean people have been concerned with Western people's evaluation of Korean culture. They have sought to communicate with the people from advanced countries. However, globalization has brought a totally different situation. There are multiple groups that one needs to negotiate and compete with for cultural identity and presentation of self. African migrant workers can provide an alternative perspective on and evaluation of Korean culture and society.

It may be difficult for Koreans to accept African migrant workers' evaluation of Korean society; however, the real context of cultural communication must be faced. Others do not always accept the theory of Korean culture and Koreanness that Koreans themselves propose to be true. Therefore, Koreans need to listen to other people's voices and begin new negotiations in constructing their cultural identity.

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