

【특별강연】

Los Angeles Riots and Korean-African American Conflict

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Introduction

The Los Angeles riots of 1992, the worst civil disturbance in America, exposed the deepening racial and class divisions in the U.S. The divisions between the haves and have-nots, minority and majority, immigrants and natives, and even among the heterogeneous “minority” populations exacerbated distrust, fear, and hopelessness. Because racial and ethnic groups perceive that they are vying against each other to grab shrinking piece of pie, racial and ethnic conflicts in Los Angeles have proliferated in the aftermath of the riots. On the other hand, the riots increased racial and ethnic awareness and opened up dialogue between people who prior to the riots had no interaction with one another on other than superficial levels. Additionally, Asian American, African American, White and Latino riot victims shared frustration and anger with the government for not providing adequate compensation for their losses.

For Korean Americans, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 fundamentally altered their course of life in America. The riots had a profound economic, psychological and ideological impact that it is

often referred to as a “turning point,” “wake-up call,” and “defining moment” for 100 year history of Korean immigration to the United States.¹⁾ When the smoke cleared, Korean Americans were among those suffering the heaviest losses: 2,280 Korean American-owned stores had been looted, burned or damaged, amounting to about \$400 million in losses.

According to a survey conducted eleven months after the riots, almost 40% of Korean-Americans said they were thinking of leaving Los Angeles.²⁾ Another study found that more than 50% of Korean businessmen were facing a “very difficult” financial situation.³⁾ Psychological damage suffered by victims of the riots still lingers and is very much part of their daily life. A survey conducted by the Korean American Inter-Agency Council (KAIAC) found that 15% of college-age youth had dropped out of school because of the riots.⁴⁾ Many Korean Americans lost faith in the “American Dream” and began to wonder about their place and purpose of life in America. The riots also profoundly impacted Korean American family relations and stability.

In retrospect, however, Korean Americans have gained much from the painful, tragic and traumatic experience of the riots; in particular, they have learned many valuable lessons regarding what it means to

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- 1) Edward T. Chang, “The Los Angeles Riots: A Korean American Perspective.” *Korean and Korean-American Studies Bulletin*. Vol.4 No.3 Summer/Fall 1993: 10-11.
 - 2) For more detail on this survey see, K. Connie Kang, “40% of Koreans in Poll Ponder Leaving” *Los Angeles Times*. March 19, 1993: B1.
 - 3) Carla Rivera, “Korean-American Looking Elsewhere After Riots.” *Los Angeles Times*. December 24, 1992: A-3.
 - 4) K. Connie Kang, “Korean Riot Victims Still Devastated, Study Finds Urban Problems: Nearly a third of the families surveyed say they face financial ruin. They blame bureaucratic hurdles for delays in reopening businesses.” *Los Angeles Times*. July 23, 1993: B-3.

be a minority group in America. The purpose of this paper is two folds: to critically examine the nature of Korean-African American conflict precipitated riots and to revisit these lessons and to critically analyze community responses to the crisis. In addition, this paper examines how the riots impacted the power structure, representation, political participation, and empowerment of the Korean American community.

Economic Factors: Underlying Ethnic Tensions

Since the Korean-African American relationship involves immigrant-minority-merchants and native-minority-customers, the unique conditions and circumstances of each community must be examined.

The "middleman minority" theory (Blalock, 1967:79-84; Bonacich, 1973; Bonacich and Jung, 1982; Loewen, 1971; Zenner, 1982) suggests that "because of their economic niche, immigrant groups (e.g., Koreans) are likely to experience friction with at least three important segments of the population: clientele, competitors, and labor unions." In other words, middleman minority theory predicts that Korean merchants cannot avoid friction with the African American community because of the built-in conflictual relationship with their African American customers. Korean merchants face hostility from African American merchants who charge that they are driving them out of business by undercutting prices. It is easy to see how the problem 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.

Indeed, the root cause of the inter-ethnic conflict appears to be economic survival. African American complaints against Korean merchants often focus on the following economic issues: 1) “they (Korean merchants) do not hire African American workers,” 2) “they overcharge African American customers for inferior products,” 3) “they do not contribute their profits back to the African American community.”⁵⁾ In other words, African Americans perceive Korean merchants as a threat to their own economic survival. Some African Americans perceive Korean merchants as a long line of “outsiders” who exploit African American community. However, a majority of African American customers indicated, “It does not matter who serves them as long as they receive good service.”⁶⁾ Mindful of the complaints from the African American community, many Korean businesses have begun to contribute to African American civic and voluntary organizations.

The economic factor in the merchant-client relationship is no doubt, one of the main sources of the problems between Korean Americans and African Americans. However, it does not appear to be the sole, or even the most important, factor behind Korean-

5) For more detail see Edward T. Chang, “Myths and Realities of Korean-Black American Relations.” in Eui-Young Yu ed. Black-Korean Encounter: Toward Understanding and Alliance. Los Angeles: Institute for Asian American and Pacific Asian Studies, 1994:83-89.

6) Ella Stewart, “Ethnic Cultural Diversity: Ethnographic Study of Cultural Study of Cultural Differences and Communication Styles between Korean Merchants and African American Patrons in South Los Angeles” M.A. thesis, Department of Communications, California State University Los Angeles, 1989:9.

African American conflicts. If the targeting of Korean merchants is indeed the direct result of a double standard, then the issue of inter-ethnic conflict has racial implications as well as economic ones.

Social and Cultural Factors: Underlying Conflicts

Cultural misunderstanding between the two groups plays an important role in fueling and sometimes escalating the confrontations. African American customers complain that Korean merchants treat them with disrespect and say the merchants can't communicate with them. I must emphasize, however, it is not the root cause of the Los Angeles riots of 1992 as mainstream media portrayed during and after the riots.

Korea is one of the most homogeneous societies in the world claim to have one language, one culture, and one ethnicity. "Monocultural people (i.e., Koreans) doing business in a multi-cultural society are potentially problematic. Particularly, the South Central Los Angeles is probably the worst place Koreans can come into," declared Larry Aubry of Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission.⁷⁾ "Koreans don't know how to interact with customers." And again, "it is clear these (Korean immigrants) are hard-working and industrious. But there's a high degree of resentment being bred against them in the African American community," observes Melanie Lomax, vice

7) Interview with Larry Aubry on September 22, 1988. He also made the same statement on a public television (KCET channel 28) documentary the "Clash of Cultures" program on January 17, 1987.

president of the NAACP. Lomax claims that cultural differences account for the majority of the disputes between Korean merchants and African American customers. Lomax says, "we've identified it as cultural differences—both groups are not particularly educated about the other's cultural heritage" (Los Angeles Times, April 15, 1985).

According to Stewart (1989), 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. Stewart found that Korean merchants most frequently mentioned loudness, bad language, and shoplifting as inappropriate behaviors by black patrons, stating that African American patrons should have shown respect and courtesy, and should have apologized more frequently. African American patrons most frequently mentioned Korean merchant/employees' negative attitude - being ignored and being watched constantly, as well as having money thrown on the counter -as inappropriate behaviors.⁸⁾

When Korean merchants encounter what they consider as an inappropriate act, they basically react in two ways: by ignoring the customer, or by getting angry and confront him or her. Korean merchants believe that ignoring an African American patron is often a rational and appropriate response to an "inappropriate behavior." The underlying assumption is that "a person who shows no respect for me is not worth paying much attention to." Because Korean merchants place such a high priority on appropriate and inappropriate behavior, sometimes they even forget that they are businessmen. Instead, they engage in direct confrontations with customers. "How

8) Stewart, 1989: chapter 2:2.

can I smile at the customer who use bad language and shows no respect for me?" declared one merchant.

Being totally ignored by a merchant is an especially sensitive issue for many African American patrons. There is a strong sense of "victimization" among residents of South Central Los Angeles. Being ignored by others, and especially by merchants, is a direct insult to one's humanity, regardless of the nationality or ethnicity.⁹⁾ "I patronize the gas station because a Korean lady always greets me with 'hello' and never forgets to say have a nice day," said one man. "Across from that gas station, there is an African American-owned gas station. But he has never said hello or been friendly to me, so I patronize the Korean-owned gas station."¹⁰⁾ Protesters at a Korean store held picket signs stating, "Cultural Difference? A Smile is Universal." "Your Pride is more Valuable than a Free Clock." "They call us 'Nigger' in there."¹¹⁾

Korean merchants have no historical understanding or awareness of the American civil rights movement and U.S. race relations in general.¹²⁾ Ignorance and cultural misunderstandings contribute to tensions. However, cultural misunderstanding itself is not the root cause of this conflict. A preexisting volatile and conflictual relationship between the two groups must be examined more closely. As noted by Stewart, "like social interaction, then, the content or quality of interaction is more important in predicting anti-Koreanism

9) *Ibid.* 1989.

10) Interview with one of the African American residents of South Central Los Angeles.

11) Boycott of the Slauson Indoor Swap Meet began on November 18, 1989.

12) I wrote a Korean language book Who African Americans Are. Within three months of publication, it went into third printing. It shows the degree of willingness for Korean immigrants to learn about African American history and culture.

than the mere exposure to either social or economic contact.” The content or quality of interaction between Korean merchants and African American residents plays a critical role in either minimizing or exacerbating tension.

Clash of Ideologies

The “immigrant theory” (Glazer, 1975; Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Sowell, 1980) predicts that recent immigrants from Asia and Latin America will follow the examples of European immigrants who have successfully entered mainstream American society through hard work and assimilation. The “immigrant theory” places emphasis on individual social and economic upward mobility through discipline, hard-work, education and willingness to work long hours.

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. Many Korean immigrants believe that African Americans should not blame anyone except themselves for their misery and misfortune. Korean immigrants have no awareness that the development of the African American slums was a direct outcome of racial discrimination in employment, housing, education and politics.

On the other hand, internal colonial theory (Blauner 1972) views the pattern of American race relations in terms of the continual oppression of the Third World people. It rejects the notion that

European immigrants and non-European immigrants have had the equal chance to succeed in American society. People of color are seen as having been placed in a subordinate position with economic exploitation, political subjugation, and racism. Rejecting assimilationist paradigm, internal colonial theory treats racial inequality as product of historical and institutional discrimination against racial minorities. In addition, European immigrants came to America voluntarily while non-Europeans were enslaved, conquered, and subjugated. Dual labor market functioned to pay different wages for whites and non-white workers although they performed exactly same work with equal qualification and skills.

More importantly, the two groups have different perceptions about America. Becoming an independent entrepreneur represents "success" to many African Americans while it is nothing more than an avenue for "making a living" to many Korean immigrants.¹³⁾ Although Korean immigrants move into small business in search of American dream, they often face the cold reality that they cannot make much money. "I know that I can't make much money in this business," said one merchant. Although some businesses have become successful, the majority of Korean-owned mom-and-pop stores are struggling to make ends meet.

Confrontations derive from the different historical, economic and

13) See Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, Immigrant Entrepreneur. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; Pyong Gap Min, 1988. For detailed discussion about the role of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs, see Bonacich, E. "The Role of the Petite Bourgeoisie Within Capitalism: A Response to Pyong Gap Min." Amerasia Journal. Vol.15 No.2, 1989:195-203;
Edna Bonacich, "The Social Costs of Immigrant Entrepreneurship." Amerasia Journal Vol.14 No.1, 1988; Pyong Gap Min, "The Social Costs of Immigrant Entrepreneurship: A Response to Edna Bonacich." Amerasia Journal. Vol.15 No.2, 1989:187-194.

ideological experiences of the two groups. African Americans, who have learned to stand up for their rights because of historical persecution and oppression, will not tolerate attacks on the most important thing they have left—their dignity. In the next section, I will critically examine impact of Los Angeles riots on the Korean American community in terms of the power structure, representation, political participation, and empowerment of the Korean American community.

Los Angeles Riots

The Los Angeles riots of 1992 involved not only whites and blacks but also Asians, Koreans, Latinos and other groups. Others have characterized it as “bread riots” suggesting lower-class uprising. One woman who participated in looting explained that “this was the first time she could get shoes for all six of her children at once.” The looting and burning may have been articulation of genuine grievances and protest against social and economic conditions that oppress and discriminate against poor minorities. Several factors have contributed to frustration and the worsening of conditions for residents of South Central Los Angeles: deindustrialization, the rise of neoconservatism, dissatisfaction with law enforcement and justice system, and the arrival of new Latino immigrants and Asian merchants.

Deindustrialization of America: Worsening Class Inequality

Deindustrialization and relocation of American firms has had a negative impact on African American community. Many American

corporations have shut down their manufacturing plants in the United States, relocating abroad (Asia and Mexico), where cheaper labor allows for lower production costs, African American workers experienced displacement and unemployment. Deindustrialization, or the structural realignment of the American economy during the 1970s and 1980s, was the U.S. corporate response to the economic crisis created by increasing global competition. "Runaway shops" and overseas investment was an aggressive tactic by capitalists to regain competitiveness and increase profits. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harris (1982: 4) on noted that by the early 1980s, "every newscast seemed to contain a story about a plant shutting down, another thousand jobs disappearing from a community, or the frustrations of workers unable to find full-time jobs utilizing their skills and providing enough income to support their families." Although some politicians blamed the increase of imports from Asia for the loss of American jobs, it was the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy that caused the plant closures and joblessness among American workers. In fact, it has been estimated that during the decade of the 1970s, private disinvestments in plants and equipment eliminated at least 32 million jobs in the United States (Bluestone and Harrison 1982: 35). Many companies also simply decided to pick up and move to other areas where wages were lower, unions weaker, and the business climate better. Because of these developments, unemployment was no longer the problem of the poor. The middle-class workers in traditional manufacturing industries such as steel, rubber, and automotive were the hardest hit as they experienced permanent displacement with no prospect of finding equivalent employment.

Michael Harrington wrote in his book *New American Poverty*

(1980) that “the lower-middle and middle rungs of the American occupational structure are at risk: the top and the bottom grow.” In other words, deindustrialization polarized class inequality in the United States: High-tech industries and low-paying unskilled jobs grew, and traditional middle-class jobs declined. For example, New York City lost 400,000 jobs between 1970 and 1980, white-collar industries increased their employment by 17 percent and the number of sweatshops rose (Sassen-Koob 1982).

1980s: Era of Neoconservatism

Los Angeles “riots” of 1992 was an inevitable consequence of the failure of neoconservative policies of the 1980s. The resurgence of the neo-conservatism has had a detrimental and negative impact on minority groups. During the 1980s, this political climate enabled the drastic cutting of social programs for inner cities. Many white Americans demonstrated through their votes that they were more willing to spend their tax dollars on military build-up than on programs that addressed so-called “black problems.” Today, many Americans believe that “blacks have been given more than a fair chance to succeed” with the passage of the civil rights act and the implementation of Affirmative Action programs. In fact, whites resent that the liberals or democrats “gave-in” too much to the demands of black Americans at the expense of whites. As I discussed earlier, the economic boom of 1980s primarily benefited white Americans and increased the gap between haves and have-nots. Simply put, the poor got poorer and the rich got richer.

Republican administrations have succeeded in manipulating and

dominating the language of the "politics of race." Over the past few decades, they have successfully pointed the finger at the victims of racism and repeatedly scapegoated immigrants or minorities for societal problems. It is important to note that anti-Asian sentiment and violence has increased in an atmosphere of neoconservative public policies, which scapegoat and blame victims. Furthermore, some argue that the neoconservative policies of the Republican administrations pitted minority groups against each other in the form of Korean-African American and Latino-African American tensions and increased the rise of anti-minority violence during the 1980s. It is consistent with the historical development of majority-minority relations that the power structure blames the victims for social and problems in this country.

Police Brutality and Justice System

The demands for justice were heard loud and clear during the "riots." The problem of police brutality has been a major issue for African Americans living in the inner city. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) has had a reputation for brutalizing African American suspects. African American communities have long complained that it was common for African American suspects to be harassed and insulted by LAPD officers. Young African American men are often stopped just because they fit a "description" or are in the wrong neighborhood. In fact, the Watts riot of 1965 was triggered by the mistreatment of an African American suspect by a California Highway Patrol officer. Although the videotape of the beating of Rodney King shocked and outraged most Americans, for

African Americans, it was nothing more than confirmation of their daily reality.

The distrust and enmity between police and African American and Latino youths contributed to the explosion of the city in 1992. The atmosphere preceding the verdict contributed to clash between the LAPD and African American youths. William, an aide to an elected black official commented that "the black community is under siege from the fall-out of racism, gangs, drugs and violence. Therefore, the Christopher Commission, the Kolts Commission, the Webster Commission (1992), and the Tucker Committee (1992) recommended the systematic changes in the LAPD to establish a positive relationship with Los Angeles's diverse communities.

Before the verdicts, city officials and community leaders warned of the possibility of widespread violence in the city. Chief Daryl Gates publicly declared that he had set aside a million dollars to pay overtime for putting down a civil unrest. And yet, the Webster Commission Report (1992) found that Gates and the LAPD had no such plan. In fact, the Webster Report (1992: 85) called it "the across-the-board failure in the planning function at every level of the emergency response to the civil disorder that erupted on April 29, 1992." When the violence erupted in the City of Los Angeles, Chief Gates left his post to attend a political fundraiser to defeat the Christopher Commission reform initiative.

Despite the warning of the Kerner Commission Report, the conditions of South Central Los Angeles and African American communities in the United States deteriorated and worsened during the 1980s and the early 1990s. Despair, hopelessness, and sense of abandonment are widespread in African American community in the

1990s. Various studies have found that one in four black men in their 20s is in jail or otherwise involved in the criminal justice system, black men in poor neighborhoods are less likely to live to age 65 than men in Bangladesh, and the majority of black babies are born in single-parent household.¹⁴⁾ The gap between haves and have-nots widened and many African Americans lost their "American Dream" as they out of labor market. In the 1960s, racial disorder was a revolution of rising expectations, but today it is about diminishing expectations (Phillips 1991).

Great Awakening: Lessons of LA Riots

Korean Americans had been fairly invisible in the U.S. prior to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. After the riots Korean Americans gained visibility and recognition as a minority group -- distinct from Chinese and Japanese Americans -- because they were featured prominently in media coverage. Elaine Kim, a professor Comparative Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, wrote "what they experienced on 29 and 30 April was a baptism into what it really means for controlled a Korean to become American in the 1990."¹⁵⁾

In trying to rebuild after the riots, the storeowners discovered just how isolated and excluded from the political mainstream Korean Americans were. No one from City Hall or Sacramento paid any

14) Los Angeles Times, August 1, 1992: 1.

15) Elaine Kim, "Home is Where the *Han* Is: A Korean-American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals." In Gooding-Williams, ed., Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising. 1993: 219. Also see Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, Blue Dreams. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.

attention to the needs have of Korean American victims. Many Korean Americans felt that they had been scapegoated as the cause of America's racial problems by media and politicians. K.W. Lee, a prominent Korean American journalist wrote, "A minority's minority--voiceless and powerless--has been singled out for destruction by a politically powerful but economically frustrated minority." Korean Americans have been silent and failed to participate in political processes in America. In the aftermath of the riots, Korean Americans emerged as one of the most and yet vulnerable, exploitable, and underrepresented minority groups in America. Political empowerment became a specific, concrete and immediate goal for Korean Americans, and they began to take appropriate measures.

For second generation Korean Americans, the riots gave rise to a renewed sense of pride and ethnic awareness. Born and raised in America, they tried to separate themselves from their parents who spoke broken English with little understanding of American society and ways of life. However, the riots profoundly altered perspectives of second generation who began to appreciate and closely identify with suffering and pain of first generation Korean immigrants. For the first time, second generation could understand how difficult it was for their parents to adjust to life in America. They saw what happened to their parents' stores and realized no one was there to help or protect them. Reclaiming "Korean ness" between second generations brought new sense of Korean American ethnic identity and activism. A second-generation Korean American student wrote, "I used to just consider myself an American, usually neglecting to express my ethnic background. I was embarrassed and ashamed, because many Koreans had established a negative image among the

media and the African Americans. Second generation Korean Americans realized that they had to rise to the occasion and provide the bridge between the voiceless and unrepresented Korean immigrants and the mainstream political arena.

On May 1, 1992, few hundred young Korean Americans organized a "peace rally" in the heart of Koreatown. Calling for peace and harmony in the city and an end to violence and destruction, this rally would be one of the largest Asian American gathering in the 150 year history of Asian Americans in the United States. On May 2, 1992, approximately 30,000 -- mostly Korean Americans -- attended the peace rally to protest the lack of police protection during the riots and to call for racial harmony in the city.¹⁶⁾ This rally marked a truly historic moment of unity among young, old, men, women, immigrant, 1.5 generation, and second generation Korean Americans.

The first generation Korean immigrants realized that they had been living in America as sojourners or guests. They were more concerned and interested in homeland politics, culture and society than affairs in the United States. Koreans in America had left their hearts in Seoul and established their own ethnic enclave "Koreatown" in Los Angeles.¹⁷⁾ All of sudden, Korean immigrants realized that they, too, had no choice but to establish their place in America. Transforming from Koreans in America into Korean American consciousness meant shifting the primary focus from homeland (Korea) to their place of residence (America).

16) The Los Angeles Times (May 3, 1992: A1) estimated the crowd as 30,000, but Korean language media reported that 100,000 people attended rally.

17) K. Connie Kang, "South Korean Politics Remain a Passion in L.A." Los Angeles Times. December 13, 1992: A-1.

The riots served as an agent to bridge the gap between immigrant and second generation Korean Americans. The two groups have begun to understand, communicate and work together to rebuild the Korean American community. And yet, there are many practical obstacles to be overcome if immigrant and second generation Korean Americans can continue to forge cooperative working relationship. It is important to note that the Korean American community is bi-modal community divided along nativity, language, culture, custom and identity. Therefore, immigrant and second generation Koreans have to work extra-hard to bridge the gap. The riots broke the gap between the two generations, however, many substantive issues remain unresolved.

Political Empowerment

The riots of 1992 increased Korean American political consciousness and participation. During the past five years, the Korean American community has adopted different strategies to accomplish the goal of political empowerment. There have been many encouraging and visible signs of change in Korean American community politics since the riots. Despite the efforts, however, Korean American community has not been able to strengthen its political power. What does Korean American political empowerment mean? How can Korean Americans empower themselves? What are the most effective strategies to gain access, representation and incorporation into mainstream political process in America? More importantly, what have Korean Americans done to achieve political empowerment?

When four Korean American candidates won elections held shortly after the Los Angeles riots of 1992, it appeared that Korean Americans had finally made gains in achieving a degree of political power. Korean Americans were jubilant with the news of the election of Korean American politicians in California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii. These elections were hailed as a milestone achievement for Korean American community which had been searching for a Korean American "voice" to be actively involved in the political dialogue of mainstream America.

During the riots, Korean Americans learned harsh lesson that no Korean American politicians in City Hall meant no voice and representation in the city politics. Therefore, it seemed logical to support Korean American candidates in local, state and national elections regardless of one's political orientation and/or ideology. Most Korean Americans equated political empowerment with electing Korean American candidates in local, state and national offices. One of the first organizations that sought Korean American political power was the Korean American Coalition.

Prior to the riots, the Korean American Coalition (KAC), a non-partisan organization, served as lone the voice for the Korean American community to the larger society. The KAC focused on electoral politics as the means for gaining access and representation for Korean Americans in mainstream politics. To increase political visibility and power, KAC launched voter registration drives and held occasional forums, debates, and educational symposiums on political issues in the United States. In the aftermath of the riots, KAC stepped up its citizenship-drive and voter registration campaigns to increase the number of Korean American voters. Despite the

moderate success of their voter-registration campaign, however, KAC has not emerged as an advocacy civil rights organization for the Korean immigrant community. Instead, the KAC focused on non-controversial issues such as education and voter-registration campaigns. Although these activities are important and necessary to increase political visibility and power, Korean American community needs to establish civil rights organizations. To emerge as a voice for Korean American community, the KAC must be willing to confront controversial issues and take strong stance against anti-immigrant and anti-affirmative action legislations to protect the interests of Korean immigrant community.

A group of younger generations working with the existing political party system formed Korean American Democratic Committee (KADC) and Korean American Republican (KARA). Both organizations claim to represent the interests of the Korean American community, and the division along political party lines reflects the heterogeneity of the Korean American community. The formation of KADC and KARA provided institutional base for linking Korean American community to the mainstream political process. Both groups, however, must overcome many challenges and obstacles in order to adequately represent the interests of Korean American to the larger society. For instance, both need to build solid bases within Korean American communities: they need sufficient funding; recruit new members in order to become effective political organizations.

A number of social service agencies played a central role in educating and heightening the political consciousness of Korean immigrant community in the aftermath of the riots. In Los Angeles, Korean American social service agencies formed Korean American

Inter-Agency Council (KAIAC) to advocate the needs and concerns of Korean American community. KAIAC conducted survey of Korean American riot victims and demanded adequate assistance to victims by government agencies. In the meantime, Korean Youth Community Center (KYCC), National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC), Korea Resource Center (KRC), Korean Immigrant Workers's Advocacy (KIWA) and other organizations are notable because they are run by 1.5 or 2nd generation Korean Americans.

National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC) was founded in October 1994 in Los Angeles to address the broad issues of education, culture, and community service. The NAKASEC played a major role in educating Korean Americans about Proposition 187 in 1994, the Welfare Reform Initiative in 1996. They mobilized the Korean and English language media as means for disseminating information. For instance, NAKASEC launched a "Justice for Immigrants" campaign to educate the public about the vicious nature of the anti-immigrant legislation. The "Justice for Immigrants" campaign launched a fund raising drive to place a full-page advertisement in the Washington Post. For the first time, the Korean American community group played a major role in organizing and leading a national campaign on a major civil rights issue. More than 20 organizations participated in the "Justice for Immigrants" campaign that raised the public awareness and pressured the Congress and President to reconsider the passage of the anti-immigrant legislation. The campaign raised more than twice the original goal to pay for the advertisement, and a full-page ad was placed twice. The NAKASEC may be the first step toward

formation of the national civil rights organization for Korean Americans. Although NAKASEC was successful in multiracial and multiethnic coalition building as exhibited in the "Justice for Immigrant" campaign, it still needs to build solid foundation and broader supports within Korean American community to be more effective advocacy organization.

Korean American political empowerment still has a long way to go despite the moderate successes of the efforts I have just mentioned. Institutionalization of the national Korean American civil rights organization is a matter of life or death for the Korean American community in the post-Los Angeles riots era. Building a foundation for Korean American political empowerment must be the first priority for Korean American political empowerment. We would be wise to also acknowledge the political experiences of African Americans over the past two decades. During the 1980s, America's major cities elected African American mayors, but the plight of African American community did not drastically improve their terms. For example, the election of Tom Bradley as a mayor of the city of Los Angeles had little effect on improving political and economic conditions of African American community.¹⁸⁾ Thus, the election of African American politicians did not ensure political empowerment or economic prosperity for African American community.

18) Byran O. Jackson, "Racial and Ethnic Voting Cleavages in Los Angeles Politics." In Byran O. Jackson and Michael B. Preston eds. Racial and Ethnic Politics in California. Berkeley: IGS Press, 1991: 193-218.

Inter-Generational Cooperation

According to Bonacich and Modell (1980), ethnic solidarity is enhanced when ethnic groups face hostility from the larger society in which they are located. Several researchers (Min, 1996; Abelmann and Lie, 1995; Chang, 1995) noted that the Los Angeles riots of 1992 increased ethnic solidarity among Korean American. English-speaking 1.5 and 2nd generation Korean Americans poured into Koreatown as volunteers to help victims shortly after the riots. For the first time, younger and older generations set aside their differences and came together to rebuild the Korean American community. The younger generation not only showed deep compassion for the victims of riots but also demonstrated their desire to actively participate in the rebuilding process. However, it is too simplistic to argue that the riots increased "ethnic solidarity" in the Korean American community.¹⁹⁾ The riots not only increased ethnic awareness and solidarity in the Korean American community but also raised multiethnic consciousness and coalition building as a strategy to seek greater inclusion in multiethnic America.

Despite the enthusiasm and the spirit of volunteerism shown by 1.5 and second generation Korean Americans, generational cooperation was short-lived. Younger generation Korean Americans were soon disappointed when they were relegated to "insignificant" or "marginal" roles such as answering telephone calls, photocopying, running errands, etc. There are several reasons why this attempt at

19) Pyong Gap Min in his book Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996 argues that Korean-African American conflict increased solidarity in the Korean American community.

cooperation was unsuccessful:

First, the Korean immigrant generation lacked the “institutional infra-structure” to embrace the younger generation. Although many younger generation Korean Americans volunteered to help Korean immigrant victims and organizations, the first generation Korean immigrants did not know how to work with younger generations. Korean organizations are often leader-centered with the president exercising almost absolute power. Often, the president is responsible for providing necessary funds and running the day to day operations as well. Under these circumstances, there was no room for the younger generation to play a significant role. Structural changes must occur in order to provide opportunities for younger generations to participate meaningfully and grow as the future leaders of the Korean American community. A few Korean American organizations are trying to change their institutional character by appointing younger those from generations as executive directors: Korean American Grocers Association, Korean American Garment Association, Korean American Chamber of Commerce. The majority of Korean organizations, however, still retain authoritative, undemocratic, stagnant institutional structures.

Language barrier poses major difficulties for first generation and second generation to work together. Korean American community lacks bilingual and bicultural leaders who can bridge the gap between the two generations. In the heat of discussion, language barrier often exacerbate the tensions between the older and younger generation. Differences in cultural patterns of social interaction also major barriers for generational cooperation. The younger generation, who were raised and educated in America, find it hard to swallow

“Korean-ways” of doing business, which demand obedience to leaders, authority and elders. For younger generation, it is hard to accept this what they perceive as an “undemocratic” decision-making process of Korean American organizations. In addition, the sexism rooted in Korean culture often offends young Korean American women. Young Korean American women often complaints that they are not given same respect and courtesy of professionalism by male-dominant Korean American society.

The time has come to pass the baton to the next generation. Younger generation leaders have reached their maturity -- many are now in 40s now. These individuals have gained experience and knowledge dealing with mainstream America. The immigrant generation should provide emotional and financial support and let the younger generation take over the day-to-day operation of community organizations. This does not mean that the first generation should “retire” completely from community activism. There is still much that the younger generation can learn from those who preceded them. The future looks bright if the first generation lay the foundations and younger generation operationalize Korean American organizations into visible, powerful and influential body in American society.

Church As an Agent for Social Activism?

The church is the most important, influential and dominant institution for Korean Americans. According to K. Connie Kang of the Los Angeles Times, Korean American “churches provides one-stop center for Koreans’ needs as it helps with jobs, language

classes and housing.”²⁰⁾ Korean American churches are therefore more than religious and/or social service providing institutions. They are places where Korean immigrants mingle together and share information about jobs, business opportunities, and political issues. Studies show that a majority of Korean immigrants are churchgoers with 70 percent of Korean immigrants attending church regularly.²¹⁾ Historically, the church functioned as the most important social, religious, economic and cultural institution in the Korean American community. During the turn of the century, Korean churches in the United States were the center of independence activities against Japan’s colonial domination of Korea. Churches were not afraid to take political stances and they actively participated in community issues. In contrast, new immigrant churches lack this dynamic of social activism as they have retreated from “secular” community issues.

A tremendous amount of financial and human resources are funneled into Korean American churches. As such, they are in a position not only to provide leadership and assistance but also to share resources with other institutions and social agencies that are struggling to survive financially. Can churches provide this much needed leadership? Can they offer new visions and function as an agent for social and political change in the Korean American community? The call for new vision and leadership in Korean American churches emerged in the aftermath of the riots. As the most important and influential institutions, they have the duty to

20) K. Connie Kang, “Church Provides One-Stop Center for Koreans’ Needs.” Los Angeles Times, October 23, 1992: A-1.

21) See Illsoo Kim, 1981; Pyong Gap Min, 1988; Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, Eui-Young Yu,

meet the needs of the constituencies they serve. Unfortunately, the renewed sense of social activism for Korean American churches has not translated into concrete actions. Except in few isolated cases, most Korean American churches went back into their "comfort zone" of providing emotional and psychological healing, individual salvation, and/or working to increase in attendance of their own church.

The disengagement of Korean American churches in community issues has had a detrimental impact for the Korean American community at large. There aren't any other institutions that equal the church in terms of human and financial resources and power. Although Korean American churches played many positive roles for recent Korean immigrants, they failed to provide leadership and action plans to change the outlook of the Korean American community. If Korean American churches continue to absorb human and financial resources without giving it back to the community, the future prospects look very gloomy at best.

Korean American Ethnicity and Identity

The notions of race, ethnicity and identity are very new and foreign concepts to most Korean immigrants who came from a homogeneous environment. The Los Angeles riots of 1992 exposed the great racial divide in America. A few demagogues emerged to speak for certain ethnic communities and they were celebrated as heroes of these respective communities. For example, Danny Bakewell of the Brotherhood Crusade incited a confrontation with Latino workers and closed down the construction site in South Central Los Angeles shortly after the riots. Bakewell claimed, "I am

here in the interest of black people... I am representing the interests of African American men, women and children.”²²⁾ Supporters of Bakewell praised him as a courageous leader of African American community that revived protest as an effective political tool to advance African American interests. On the other hand, critics charged that Bakewell practices racial politics to advance his personal interests.²³⁾ Joel Kotkin wrote about the disunity and racial divide in Los Angeles: “rather than unity in the city’s hour of deep crisis, as was widely hoped after the riots, there has been a notable rise of political me-ism that threatens to frustrate, even undermine recovery attempts.”²⁴⁾ Unfortunately, the actions of these demagogues reveal how “the city’s ethnic groups are struggling to assert power first and find common ground later.”²⁵⁾

In the context of divisive racial politics, Korean Americans were forced to reexamine their ethnicity and survival. For the first time, Korean immigrants had to confront what it means to be a “Korean American.” Indeed, *Sa-I-gu* serves as a historical moment or foundation that gave birth to the “Korean American” identity to both

22) Edward J. Boyer, Who is it that Cries for Us? Los Angeles Times. July 8, 1992: B7.

23) Royce Esters, head of the NAACP’s Compton Branch, and supporters of Jones (owner of Mr. J’s Family Restaurant and Sports Bar) picketed Bakewell. Protesters said “they were troubled that a man who has championed economic empowerment for African Americans would be instrumental in shutting down a black-owned business. For more detail about this case, see Greg Krikorian, Compton Restaurant Closed After Failing to Pay Debt.” Los Angeles Times. July 11, 1996: B-3; Greg Krikorian and J. Michael Kennedy, “NAACP Protests Target Bakewell.” Los Angeles Times. May 3, 1996: B-1.

24) Joel Kotkin, “Me-First Politics is Latest Plague on L.A.’s House Community.” Los Angeles Times. July 5, 1992: M-6.

25) Edward J. Boyer, Who is it that Cries for Us? Los Angeles Times. July 8, 1992: B7.

immigrant and the second generation.

Multiethnic Coalition Building

The riots taught Korean Americans that they must adjust their thinking and behavior to live in a multiethnic society. The Korean American community must learn to work with other communities and participate in the making of a multiethnic Los Angeles. Korean Americans realized that because they were reared in a homogeneous society they were ill-prepared for life in a multiethnic metropolis. It is important to note, however, that Korean Americans have been actively involved in trying to improve relations with the African American community since before the 1992 riots. For example, the Black-Korean Alliance (BKA) was formed to facilitate dialogue and mutual understanding between the two communities. During the 1980s and 1990s, suspicion and animosity increased tensions between Korean merchants and African American customers. And yet, good-will alone was not enough to sustain the BKA. The Black-Korean Alliance disbanded few months after the Los Angeles riots of 1992.

During the riots, Korean-language media, especially radio stations, functioned as the "life-line" for the Korean immigrant community providing critical information to desperate listeners. Korean Americans showed great interest in learning about Latino and African American history and culture. Korean-language newspapers, television and radio stations continued to inform, educate and enlighten the community about African Americans and Latino experiences. For example, Korean radio stations in Los Angeles and

Chicago serialized the author's Korean-language book Who African Americans Are. It was received well by Korean American listeners. On May 1, 1993, a local Korean-language radio station Radio Korea (KBLA-AM 1580) and KJLH-FM 102.3, a station which primarily serves African American community, aired a joint broadcast *Bridging the Gap* to discuss misconceptions and promote mutual understanding.²⁶⁾

The Korean American community began to play an active role in promoting mutual understanding between different groups in Los Angeles: Such efforts include the Black-Korean Christian Alliance, Scholarships to African American students, Trips to South Korea sponsored by the Korean government, etc. Unlike the Black-Korean Alliance (1986-1992), these individual efforts lacked institutional memory that can prolong relationships into concrete actions or projects. Today, there is only one visible institutional link that connect the Korean American community to African American, Latino or other communities in Los Angeles: the Black-Korean Christian Alliance. Fortunately, there has been an effort to establish a Korean and African American Human Relations Council to solve inter-ethnic conflicts with dialogue, exchange of ideas and culture, and mutual understanding. If it were successful, the natural next step would be to include Latinos as coalition partners.

Conclusion

Ten years after the riots, Los Angeles is still without a plan to

26) Author (Edward T. Chang) and Cornel West, professor of Afro-American Studies at Harvard were guest speakers for this radio program special.

address the fundamental urban needs underscored by the economic and demographic restructuring during the past two decades. The lack of visions, plans, resources and leadership pose major challenges for the city as it tries to rebuild its economic base and human relations between its many diverse communities. Korean Americans have not been able to fully recover from the 1992 Los Angeles riots yet. During the past ten years, the Korean American community has been struggling to recover from the devastation of the riots and establish community stability. There have been many discussions and meetings to develop strategies and plans of action for the future of the Korean American community. Although the riots raised the social and political consciousness of Korean immigrants, implementing changes and actions to empower the community in a multiethnic and multiracial environment has not been easy.

In conclusion, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 not only increased ethnic solidarity among Korean Americans, but also raised multiethnic consciousness. Korean Americans learned many valuable lessons from the riots. And yet, the lessons Korean Americans learned from the riots have not produced concrete plans of action. The Korean American community must formalize the urgency of establishing local and national networks and institutions in order to economically and politically empower themselves.

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