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“The Marginalization of Afro-Asians in East Asia: Globalization and the Creation of Subculture and Hybrid Identity”

By **Sierra Reicheneker**

ABSTRACT

This article explores the topic of children born of biracial couplings in East Asia. The offspring of such unique unions face severe discrimination and marginalization. The status and future of this minority is especially salient in primarily homogenous states, such as Korea, Japan, and China, where racism varies from social stigma to institutionalized policies. The article will show that they have yet to create a cohesive group identity; they remain vulnerable to negative self-image and socially imposed isolation. In such nations, progress in equality for Afro-Asians will require key Afro-Asian leaders and public figures taking a stand against prejudices, as well as international pressure, and an increase in the number of biracial people due to globalization, in addition to the growing interconnectedness through New Media. Through these actions a hybrid identity and group mentality will form for the Afro-Asians of East Asia. *Keywords:* Afro-Asian, Blasian, biracial, marginalization, globalization, subculture, hybrid identity

“All things are possible until they are proved impossible – and even the impossible may only be so as of now.”

- Pearl S. Buck¹

The growing presence of an Afro-Asian population in Asia, particularly in Korea, Japan and China, has recently come to light in the global media.² The homogenous nature of these countries exposes its biracial citizens to psychological marginalization. Despite the frequent trend within marginalized groups to create solidarity through a viable counter-culture, the Afro-Asian populations have not done so. However, with the increase in globalization, leading to larger numbers of biracial people born in these states, as well as their ability to connect through the Internet, this small minority will begin to form a group identity. This is furthered by icon-status Afro-Asians leading the way and acting as beacons of aspiration for all Afro-Asians. In addition, with the help of the international community in applying pressure on governments to change racist policies, an Afro-Asian subculture and hybrid identity is likely to emerge.

A Brief History

The first Afro-Asians were the product of American G.I.s during World War II.³ Starting in 1946, with the occupation of Okinawa and later mainland Japan, as well as the temporary military government of South Korea, Amerasian—including Afro-Asian—children became a visible reality in East Asia. The products of both prostitution and legally binding marriages, these children were largely regarded as illegitimate. When the military presence returned to America, the distinction between the two was, for all practical purposes, null. As the American military departed, any previous preferential treatment for biracial people ended, and was replaced with a backlash due to the return of ethnically-based national pride.⁴

Korea has the largest Afro-Asian population in the Far East, due to increased interracial relationships during the Korean War (1950-1953).⁵ Once again, children were the product of both legitimate marriages and prostitution. After the war, the United States Congress passed acts to allow for immigration of biracial children, including the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987. The Korean government strongly supported the emigration of Amerasian children to the United States, considering it a “cost-effective way of dealing with social welfare problems,” as they viewed the children, particularly those from Black fathers, as “institutional burdens.”⁶ However, American military men looking to bring their Asian families to the states were heavily discouraged from doing so by their superiors; Marines in particular were threatened with court martial.⁷ Despite overwhelming support and willing adoptee families in the United States, the majority of Amerasian children remained in Korea. A staggering amount of mothers abandoned their babies, especially Afro-Asian offspring, either to be raised by distant, maternal relatives or to be sent to orphanages—though this is not the case for all of the Amerasian Koreans.⁸

In China, the Afro-Asian people group is a newer phenomenon.⁹ They first began to appear beginning with African-American and African students coming to study in China, first in the city of Beijing and later in other large cities, such as Nanjing,¹⁰ Hangzhou, and Shanghai.¹¹ Prominent Afro-Chinese have recently been featured in international news, helping to bring to light the growing Afro-Asian population in China and in East Asia, as a whole.¹²

Current Marginalization

In the United States and the Caribbean, interracial relationships and multi- and biracial children have become an everyday occurrence, with one in forty people self-identifying as multi- or biracial.¹³ In addition, the public is inundated with iconic Afro-Asian figures who fill the media like pro-golfer, Tiger Woods, fashion model Kimora Simmons¹⁴, entertainer Amerie, and football player Hines Ward. It is hard to imagine the stigmatization that Afro-Asians face in primarily ethnically homogenous nations, such as Korea, Japan, and China. In these countries, people of biracial descent are seen as oddities and automatically designated as “foreign” by their own cultures, strictly as a result of their unique and different appearance.

There are several models for analyzing the marginalization of ethnic minorities. The Afro-Asian population exemplifies Park’s definition of marginalization, in that they are the “product of human migrations and socio-cultural conflict.”¹⁵ Born into relatively new territory in the area of biracial relations, their entrance into the culture of these Asian states often causes quite a stir. They also fit into Green and Goldberg’s definition of psychological marginalization, which constitutes multiple attempts at assimilation with the dominant culture followed by continued rejection. The magazine *Ebony*, from 1967, outlines a number of Afro-Asians in Japan who find themselves as outcasts, most of which try to find acceptance within the American military bubble, but with varying degrees of success.¹⁶ Many mention struggles with hair care products and skin bleaching agents. The darkest tale is that of a sixteen year old who was arrested after raping and murdering three Japanese women, the motive stemming from internalized racism. The youth confessed to committing the crime because the girls had laughed “at his color and his hair.”¹⁷ In addition to lashing out at the dominant culture, another case is that of a young man’s suicide due to his feelings of being alone and an outcast from society.¹⁸

However, according to this model, the treatment of Afro-Asians does not constitute cultural marginalization. Despite the fact they are considered foreigners, they have more in common culturally with their fellow Asians than they do with pure-blooded Americans: Afro-Asians “are far closer in language, values and life-style” to their home country, however, they have been “marginal[ized] to the normal social world around them [that of their Asian birth-home].”¹⁹ Though these people speak the language, as well as dress and act appropriately Asian, it is only their appearance that sets them apart—they are entirely Korean, Japanese, or Chinese by culture,

and yet are still ostracized.²⁰

However, it is important to note that Afro-Asians have had a few members reach prominence despite marginalization: “those who are especially attractive or talented—have become economically successful, through careers in popular music, dancing, acting, the [crime] industry or even as bar hostess.”²¹ It seems that only a few lucky members are able to enter those selective avenues to economic triumph. Unfortunately, most resort to petty crimes, or mundane, low-income, menial work upon which to survive.

In Korea, the majority of Amerasian and Afro-Asian children left behind after the Korean War are orphans. In Korea’s society, like most in East Asia, success hinges on the family, particularly on the father, due to the emphasis placed upon and legacy of Confucian values. Growing up without parents, or in many situations with only a mother, has left Afro-Asians ostracized by society. Low educational levels and unemployment run rampant. In his work on Black Koreans, Won Moo Hurh outlines four specific common problems they face: first, their illegitimate status, which is still heavily stigmatized in Korea.²² Second, their mother’s presumed prostitute and low economic status is looked down upon, even though many women were legally married to their military husbands.²³ Korean society has absorbed the stereotype that all mothers of biracial children are low-class, “sexual pariahs.”²⁴ Third, without a strong family background, there is usually a lack of higher education and subsequent difficulty in finding work. Lastly, Hurh describes their discrimination based on appearance.²⁵ Facing these problems of marginalization, Black Koreans have naturally taken on a negative self-image. Hurh says they “carry the heaviest... burden of stigmas.”²⁶

For Black Japanese, life is just as difficult. Once again, most are orphans or fatherless, the majority offspring of foreign military servicemen and businessmen. This poses a problem socially, but also institutionally, even though they were technically granted equal rights in 1947, this is not the *de facto* practice.²⁷ Without fathers, the Afro-Asian children do not have access to the *koseki*, or a record of the father’s family background. This *koseki* is necessary for entrance into most schools, job applications, and even to obtain marriage licenses.²⁸ Simply by being illegitimate or even legitimate but having a non-Japanese father, Afro-Asian children are entirely

cut out of Japanese society and the possibility of moving up the economic and social ladder. Also, the Afro-Japanese citizenship is often in a limbo status.²⁹ While the Japanese government places citizenship with that of the American fathers, the United States government puts a number of restrictions on immigration and citizenship rights, and many of the American fathers have no intention of recognizing their biracial children.³⁰ In effect, the stateless Black Japanese are treated as *gaijin*, or “foreigners,” within their own country.³¹

In China, though the situation for the Afro-Asians is still difficult, the government has a less negative influence. Biracial persons are often marginalized in the workforce because of employers who only choose the “best” applicants—“best ” being equivalent to the applicant who best fits into the Han Chinese homogeneous identity. Though all Chinese minorities struggle with finding work,³² schooling is provided without official prejudice to most urbanized Afro-Asians.³³ Socially, however, Afro-Asians can face strong racism amongst their peers. There are a number of prevalent stereotypes that accompany the half black Chinese, including being strong, as well as good singers and dancers.³⁴ The more negative stereotypes include generalized notions of Afro-Asians as having violent and sexualized natures.

Besides the individual difficulties the various nationalities face, all can agree that marginalization for the Afro-Asian is difficult to overcome by conventional means. Marginalization has historically been “transcended” by two main avenues: “passing” as the dominant ethnicity when possible, and emigrating.³⁵ For Afro-Asians, passing remains out of the question, and emigration (usually to the United States), has complications of its own.³⁶ Afro-Asians are culturally assimilated enough in terms of language to their fellow Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese that immigration to the United States can be very difficult. As minorities, they often lack extensive education and therefore any English language skills. In addition, the cost involved is usually well beyond their means. For many Afro-Asians, their economic and social marginalization appears to be a situation from which there is no escape.

Subculture and Hybrid Identity

However, a new option for rising above marginalization has presented itself in recent years: namely, the creation of a new subculture with which to identify. It has increasingly become a

huge comfort and rallying point for a number of marginalized, ethnic minorities.³⁷ In contrast to groups which have followed this trend,³⁸ the Afro-Asian community has yet to create for itself a strong community or subculture apart from the dominant society. The reason for their lack of solidarity is based around two main reasons: their small numbers and their negative self-image.

The Afro-Asian community is an extremely small minority within their respective Asian nations—though this does not detract from the gravity of their precarious situation. Their largest contingency is in Korea, where Amerasians constitute over one million, making up approximately 2% of Korea's overall population. Within that, the number of specifically Afro-Asians is even less. In Japan, their numbers are similarly low, and in China their numbers are quite low, with only a handful being present in the urban centers. With this small of a population to work with, creating a strong sense of camaraderie is naturally an uphill battle. Since they are spread thinly around the urban centers of these homogenous nations, it is not surprising that the Afro-Asian minority has yet to come together in an all-encompassing movement.

Besides their low numbers in terms of percentages, many Afro-Asians have internalized the social norms of the majority culture, creating extremely negative self-images that greatly inhibit any incentive to work toward creating a strong subculture or hybrid identity. Particularly in Korea and Japan, drugs, crime, sexual promiscuity and homelessness are disproportionate amongst the Afro-Asian population. The Afro-Asian youth also run a high risk for suicide and other self-destructive behaviors. In Amerasian Nia Nguyen's poem *My Life*,³⁹ the negative self-image felt by most Afro-Asians is clearly seen:

My life is a half-breed one with sad souvenirs
That nobody could understand...
Day by Day, I wander around
Searching for people like me
But I still find myself alone
A body of mixed race, but a soul that is not
My life of two bloodstreams led nowhere
Days went by so quick
I try to look back on my memories

Singing songs to people
That echo in my mind during the night
Songs I composed to sing to myself. (1-12)

Nguyen's despair over her ethnic background is obvious as soon as the poem begins, but even amidst the deepest negativity toward herself, there is a glimmer of hope and a sense that deep down the author has retained some pride in herself: "A body of mixed race, but a soul that is not" cries out the hopeful sixth line. Looking inward into the soul is a step back toward a positive self-image. Besides the insight into the Afro-Asian search for identity, the lack of solidarity and community is also ever present. The poem bespeaks the Afro-Asian lack of subculture. Whether the author finding herself alone, or singing songs to herself, she clearly feels alone on this journey in search of her complete identity. Nguyen, and most Afro-Asians, are alone in their current journeys, and will remain alone without the institution of a community amongst themselves.

However, this lack of a subculture is likely to change in the future. Continued globalization will lead to population growth within the Afro-Asian community.⁴⁰ The Internet has also created a new ability to connect despite physical distance. The already prevalent Afro-Asian icons, as well as the increase of Afro-Asian icons within Asia will promote the idea of pan-Afro-Asian solidarity. In addition, continued media coverage of Afro-Asians and subsequent pressure upon the government to enact positive legislation in favor of the minority will do much for their cause.

With continued globalization, the number of bi-and multi-racial children will continue to rise, including the Afro-Asian population. Considering China's continued courtship of Africa for commercial and oil-access endeavors, the presence of African students will continue to increase in China's cities and university campuses. Naturally, this will continue to increase interracial relationships and the prevalence of Afro-Asians in East Asia. Also, the economic success of African-Americans will have a direct effect on the Afro-Asian population in Asia. With more African-American men becoming prominent figures in transnational corporations, global travel and integration will continue to increase.

Besides globalization influencing the sheer number of Afro-Asians, the population is being

bolstered with new media and the growing role of the Internet. Afro-Asians in East Asia are beginning to connect with their ethnic brethren in the Caribbean, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Africa. Websites such as the Afro Asian Connection now list resources, history and information on prominent Afro Asians, as well as a dating site component. This ability to connect with other Afro-Asians online harkens back to a system started in a Tokyo orphanage of letter writing between Afro-Asians, often separated and succumbing to feelings of isolation, during the 1960s.⁴¹

Another Internet movement is the Hafu Project, initiated in 2008, which works to collect information on the various experiences of biracial Japanese, including a number of Afro-Japanese. The project released a brochure, available for 1500 Yen (approximately 18 dollars),⁴² and is currently working on a documentary which will feature half Ghanaian, half Japanese actor, signer, and activist David Yano. Other online support resources include Amerasians.org, which works to connect biracial children with the American, usually G.I., fathers, Blasian, a website with cultural information, Black Tokyo, a website kept up by an African American in Tokyo, and even a number of Facebook pages applauding Afro-Asians. The blogosphere has also seen a rise in blogs focusing on the Afro-Asian people, as well as their interactions and connections. A few of these blogs include The Blasian Experience, Blasian Exchanges, AI NO KO, Blackness in Flux in Okinawa, Token Ethnic, Blasian Baby Notes, and Euphoria Luv.

Iconic figures have played a large role in the recognition, increased attention, and furthering of positive stereotypes amongst Afro-Asians in recent years. Hines Ward, an American football player of Korean descent, is largely responsible for the study of Afro-Asians in South Korea. He also started the Helping Hands Foundation, which reaches out to Amerasian orphans in South Korea, attempting to open up more opportunities for the impoverished youth. Asian icons such as Junichi, the former Afro-Japanese middle-weight wrestling champion, Crystal Kay, Japanese pop-singer of Afro-Korean descent, and Ding Hui, the Afro-Chinese youth recently added to the Chinese National Men's Volleyball Team, have helped to further popular and positive images of Afro-Asians throughout their countries as well as all of Asia. In the realm of politics, Jean Ping, the half Gabonese, half Chinese Chairperson for the Commission of the African Union and former President of the United Nations General Assembly, stands as a positive example of Afro-

Asians.⁴³ As these and more iconic figures continue to gain “positive recognition from the public for [their] talents” Afro-Asians make progress through their shared success.⁴⁴

Since Hines Ward’s media-laden trip to South Korea, news outlets have paid special attention to the Afro-Asian populations. To name one high-profile example, in 2008, Lou Jing, half Black, 20-year-old contestant on a Shanghai television singing competition, similar in nature to United States’ program *American Idol*, was featured on a number of global media outlets. After racist Chinese bloggers lashed out against her on the internet, calling her patriotism and national identity into questions, both China and the world rushed to the young girl’s defense. A number of Chinese celebrities came out in support of Lou Jing as being fully Chinese, despite her multi-ethnic background. Her story exemplifies the significant impact the media can have on both the government and societies as a whole.

In conclusion, the Afro-Asian population, though having been psychologically marginalized, has made significant progress. Their bleak past and ongoing struggles stand out as one the final strongholds of racism. Their small numbers make for easy targets of such discrimination, but clearly—as seen with prominent examples and icons like the enchanting Lou Jing and Junichi—it is their birth nation’s loss in the pushing of this minority to the sidelines. They are not a dark secret to be kept hidden, but a people worthy of full and equal rights, worthy of dignity and respect. However, though the Afro-Asian minority have a long way to go, their future looks bright. With globalization leading to an increase in the number of Afro-Asians, the reality of the existence of bi- and multi-racial people in these formerly homogenous nations will not be forever overlooked. As more people fall into this legally non-existent category change will necessarily follow. In addition, as iconic figures continue to jumpstart the solidarity movements a subculture and hybrid identity is sure to follow. Through fame, famous Afro-Asians give hope to the rest of their marginalized brethren. This is aided in the increase in new technology. No longer must Afro-Asians search the country over to find someone like themselves. The Internet connects the former loners and spreads the message that they are not alone. Finally, as international media attention applies pressure to governments in favor of this minority, support can be garnered abroad. Though a difficult journey lies ahead, the Afro-Asians can look forward to less struggles and greater acceptance in the future.

Endnotes

¹ Pearl S. Buck, a prominent author on Asian topics, was the first to coin the term “Amerasian.” Buck was raised in China and adopted seven children, many of whom were Amerasian and one of which was Afro-Asian. She also founded the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, which works toward the support and betterment of Amerasian and biracial children throughout East Asia (Pearl S. Buck International 2010).

² Simon Elegant and Chengcheng Jiang, “Can a Mixed-Race Contestant Become a Chinese Idol?” *Time*, September 23, 2009.

³ According to *Interracial Intimacy in Japan*, by Gary Leupp, Japanese Courtesans—the precursors to the *Geisha*—are shown to have entertained and provided services to African sailors and slaves on Portuguese trade ships as early as the 16th Century. There certainly must have been offspring from these relations, though most likely any children produced from these couplings would have been victims of abandonment or infanticide.

⁴ Eun Kyung Min, “The Daughter’s Exchange in Jane Jeong Trenka’s *The Language of Blood*,” *Duke University Press: Social Text*, (2008): 115-133.

⁵ That is without counting southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, where racial mixing is a far more common occurrence, due to early trade and colonization.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷ William Burkhardt, “Institutional Barriers, Marginality, and Adaption Among American-Japanese Mixed Bloods in Japan,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 42 (1983): 526.

⁸ For instance, popular American football player, Hines Ward’s own Korean mother kept her half African-American son, and later the pair immigrated to the United States.

⁹ Elegant, “Can a Mixed-Race Contestant Become a Chinese Idol?”.

¹⁰ In particular, the African study abroad students in Nanjing came into conflict with the local Chinese students. One such conflict, compounded by discontent already felt by the oppressed Chinese students lead to large and violent protests in 1989, as covered by Nicholas D. Kristof in *The New York Times* article, “Africans in China are Finally Freed.”

¹¹ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Africans in China are Finally Freed” *The New York Times*, January 6, 1989.

¹² Elegant, “Can a Mixed-Race Contestant Become a Chinese Idol?”.

¹³ This one in forty is projected to increase to one in every five by the year 2050.

¹⁴ It is of some interest to note that Kimora Simmons own mother, Joanne Perkins was an interesting case of transnational and multiple identities, having been born in Korea, but ethnically Japanese, and adopted

by an American serviceman during the Korean War. Phoebe Eaton – *Kimora Lee Simmons, the New Queen of Conspicuous Consumption* (2005).

¹⁵ Burkhardt, “Institutional Barriers, Marginality, and Adaptation Among American-Japanese Mixed Bloods in Japan,” 520.

¹⁶ Era Bell Thompson, “Japan’s Rejected” *Ebony*, September 1967, 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁸ Burkhardt, “Institutional Barriers, Marginality, and Adaption Among American-Japanese Mixed Bloods in Japan,” 527.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 527.

²⁰ Elegant, “Can a Mixed-Race Contestant Become a Chinese Idol?”

²¹ Burkhardt, “Institutional Barriers, Marginality, and Adaption Among American-Japanese Mixed Bloods in Japan,” 531.

²² *Ibid.*, 531.

²³ *Ibid.*, 524.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 524.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 524.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 528.

²⁷ Thompson, “Japan’s Rejected,” 52.

²⁸ Burkhardt, “Institutional Barriers, Marginality, and Adaption Among American-Japanese Mixed Bloods in Japan,” 528.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 528.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 528.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 528.

³² Philip Bowling, “China and its Minorities” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2008.

³³ Elegant, “Can a Mixed-Race Contestant Become a Chinese Idol?”

³⁴ Takeyuki Tsuda, *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

³⁵ Burkhardt, “Institutional Barriers, Marginality, and Adaption Among American-Japanese Mixed Bloods in Japan,” 536.

³⁶ Thompson, “Japan’s Rejected,” 52.

³⁷ Burkhardt, “Institutional Barriers, Marginality, and Adaption Among American-Japanese Mixed Bloods in Japan,” 524.

³⁸ Jewish and Armenian minorities within the United States and the Asian-Indian minority within the United Kingdom are two examples of groups that have created a strong subculture with which to identify.

³⁹ Though Nia Nguyen's poem *My Life* speaks in particular to the Amerasian-Vietnamese experience, it reveals truths and struggles felt by Afro-Asians all over East Asia with a poignancy that has not often been written or published by the Afro-Asian community. However, Black Japanese entertainer Kazuko Kitayama, who worked under the stage name, Catherine Mine, and was featured in *Ebony* in 1967 and 1968, published her autobiography that eloquently described the dehumanizing struggle faced by Afro-Asians. Orphaned at an early age, Kazuko was generously raised by her Japanese stepfather. She released three albums in Japan, the later featuring a cover of the Louis Armstrong song, *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*. Interestingly enough, despite her minor success in the entertainment industry, she chose to emigrate to the U.S., but found it difficult due to her limbo-citizenship, stateless status. Fatherless, she was unable to get a passport and visa. A fellow Japanese entertainment celebrity finally adopted her, and only then was she legally able to leave for the United States. She married into the Black community and largely shunned her Japanese heritage, clinging to the instant embrace she felt within her husband's, John L. Finisson, African American community *Ebony* also reported in the 1968 follow-up article that she had joined her local church choir.

⁴⁰ Louisa Lim, "Mixed-Race TV Contestant Ignites Debate in China" *NPR*, November 11, 2009.

⁴¹ Burkhardt, "Institutional Barriers, Marginality, and Adaption Among American-Japanese Mixed Bloods in Japan," 524.

⁴² Correspondence with the Hafu Project revealed that the group is working on an English-language version of their brochure, which will be sold for around forty dollars. The group is headed by two biracial Japanese women, Natalie Maya Willer and Marcia Yumi Lise. They gave a talk about race and identity at the 2011 Hapa Japan Conference, at Berkley.

⁴³ "H.E. Mr. Jean Ping – President of the 59th Session of the General Assembly," *United Nations Chronicle*, 2004, <http://www.un.org/ga/president/59/office/president.html>

⁴⁴ Jodi Kim, "An "Orphan" with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics," *American Quarterly* 61 (2009): 855-879.

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