Lost in Translation? Marriages between African immigrants and Japanese women

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Work in progress –please do not quote

Abstract

Despite an image of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, Japan is host to significant immigrant populations and international marriages have been steadily increasing. The majority of international marriages in Japan consist of Japanese spouses and Asian wives. This article explores unions much less common, between sub-Saharan African husbands and Japanese wives living in Japan. Based on in-depth interviews with both African husbands and Japanese wives, this article discusses the motives for and experiences of marriage for these couples.

Introduction

International marriages (kokusai kekkon[2]) in Japan have been steadily increasing with currently one out of eighteen matches in Japan involving a foreign spouse (Roberts, 2008). Although after the second world war it were mostly Japanese women who married foreigners, or more specifically, American service men, today almost 80 per cent of international marriages consist of a foreign wife and a Japanese spouse. Reasons for the increase in international marriages are related to the greater opportunities for Japanese nationals to meet foreigners, to societal changes in for example gender relations and to more restrictive migration policies.

On the one hand, each year thousands of Japanese go abroad to work, study, or travel (Goodman, Takenaka and White, 2003). Japan, being an export-oriented country, has numerous firms and offices throughout the world where Japanese conduct business with many opportunities to meet local people. In addition, more and more young Japanese leave Japan each year to study abroad, to do volunteer work in developing countries or just to travel. On the other hand, the number of foreigners coming to Japan has been increasing as well. Japan does not consider itself as a country of immigration, yet the number of foreign workers has been increasing and universities have seen their populations internationalize. There is also still a considerable presence of American service personnel in Japan. In 2007 foreigners made up 2 per cent of the population in Japan, with their number growing over 2 million for the first time[3]. Since contact is the first

[2] The commonly used Japanese term Kokusai Kekkon refers to all intermarriages between Japanese and non-Japanese, including ethnic minorities

[3] This number does not include undocumented immigrants. Although Japan`s island status makes it difficult to enter the country illegally, it is by no means impossible. Exact numbers are lacking, but it is estimated that the total unauthorized population in Japan, mostly so-called `over-stayers`; people who entered Japan legally, on for example tourist or student visas but who then do not leave Japan after their visa expired, consists of around 250 000 people.

prerequisite for international marriages, these two developments have increased the likelihood for Japanese and foreigners to marry.

Societal changes also contribute to the rise of international marriages. For example, although discrimination on the basis of gender still prevails in Japan, women have become much more independent to pursue their own careers and life choices. This resulted in a lack of available marriage candidates for Japanese men in rural areas. Many women were not prepared anymore to live on the countryside and perform the hard work on the farm, often taking care of in-laws as well. Increasingly, Japanese men turned to countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and China to find a partner (Piper, 1997). Finally, restrictive immigration policies in Japan increasingly force migrants to develop strategies and practices to acquire legal residence and obtain an essential work permit. Marriage to a Japanese national can be such a strategy. Foreigners who marry a Japanese spouse receive, first of all, a temporary residency which enables them to work; later on they can apply for unlimited settlement permit. Although most international marriages are not conducted for legal reasons only, marriage to a Japanese national is in many cases the only option for immigrants to remain in Japan and obtain a residence permit and the right to work. Taken together, the developments discussed above resulted in an increase in international marriages from 5 000 a year in 1970 to 45 000 in 2005.

[Table 1 around here]

Although marriage partners of the Japanese originate from all corners of the world nowadays, several trends can be observed. The majority of foreign spouses come from other Asian countries such as China, Korea and the Philippines. A second, more recent, category originates from Brazil

and Peru. These are mostly so called `Nikkei-jin` or ethnic return migrants; Brazilian and Peruvian

immigrants from Japanese descent (Tsuda, 2003). The third category of spouses is the (mostly

male) partners from the U.S.A. and the UK.

[Table 2 around here]

A final significant category consists of 'others' and this category is extremely divers. This category

includes the sub-Saharan African spouses of Japanese wives. These African-Japanese marriages

will be the focus of the remainder of the paper. I will first discuss a general theoretical framework

on international or interethnic marriages. I will then connect this framework to the specific

experiences of both African immigrants and Japanese wives.

Theoretical background

Preferences, opportunities and third parties

Family sociologists agree that people have a tendency to marry within their own social group or to

marry a person who is close to them in status (Kalmijn, 1998). Although many characteristics play

a role in the choice of a spouse, research has most often examined endogamy and homogamy

with respect to race/ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status. It is assumed that an unmarried

person searches for a potential spouse who is attractive in terms of socioeconomic and cultural

resources (Kalmijn & Tubergen, 2006). Socioeconomic resources refer to resources that produce

economic well being and status. People who are higher educated, who have more prestigious jobs

and higher income are assumed to be attractive candidates. Cultural resources refer to such issues

as values, opinions, life style, knowledge, and worldview. Here the argument is not that people search for marriage candidates with more cultural resources, but rather that people search for potential spouses who are culturally similar (Kalmijn, 1998). International marriages can thus be an outcome of people's preference for a spouse with certain characteristics.

A second general factor that determines intermarriage is the opportunity to meet co-ethnics and members of other groups. When people interact on a day-to-day basis with members of the own group, they naturally have a higher chance to marry endogamously. Opportunities for contact are shaped by structural and demographic forces, such as the size of the group, the sex ratio, and residential segregation (Blau & Schwartz, 1984).

Finally, researchers have argued that the marriage market is not only a process between two potential partners, but is also affected by ''outsiders,'' such as the family, the religious community, and the state. Because mixed marriages may threaten the internal cohesion and homogeneity of the group, "third parties" have an incentive to keep new generations from marrying exogamously. There are two ways in which third parties prevent exogamy: by group identification and by group sanctions. The first line of reasoning stresses that children are socialized such that, as they are older, they identify themselves as a member of their own group. The norms that inhibit exogamy are assumed to be directly related to the homogeneity of the network in which people were raised. The second line of reasoning states that, even if people do not identify strictly with a certain group, third parties (e.g., family, religious community, state) exert control of their marriage choices by using emotional or financial pressure or by constructing legal barriers.

International marriage and integration

Since marriage is an intimate and often long-term relationship, intermarriage or heterogamy not only reveals the existence of interaction across group boundaries, it also shows that members of different groups accept each other as social equals. Intermarriage can thus be regarded as an intimate link between social groups (Kalmijn, 1998). In the international migration literature, ethnic intermarriage is considered an important indicator of, and force of, integration since marriages between members of different groups indicate frequent social interaction and strong social acceptance between groups (Gordon, 1964; Hwang, Saenz, & Aquirre, 1997). Interaction gives people an opportunity to realize the individual variety among the members of another group and, in doing so, may ultimately weaken their prejudices and stereotypes. Because intermarriage often connects the social networks of the two spouses, this applies to a range of out-group members and not just to the immediate partners (Kalmijn, 1998). In addition, it has been shown that immigrants who marry outside their own group have a better economic position (Meng & Gregory, 2005). However, previous studies on ethnic intermarriage have been conducted mainly in the United States and in other classical immigration countries. Similar results might not be found in recent countries of immigration such as Japan.

In Japan, most existing studies on international marriage concentrate on foreign-born women from developing countries marrying Japanese spouses. These foreign wives are often depicted as victims of globalization and described as vulnerable, exploited, marginalized, and inactive (Nakamatsu, 2002). From a gender perspective it is argued that the imbalance in power relationships in the domestic sphere in these international marriages reinforces the traditional patriarchal lineage system in which females have inferior status. Alternatively, these women are described as opportunity seekers, who marry only for monetary reasons. However, Nakamatsu (2002) argues in her in-depth study on Korean, Chinese and Filipino women married to Japanese

men that their marriage experiences and motivations are much more complex than these limited available interpretations.

In general, the marriage strategies of male migrants and their experiences of international marriage are highly under-researched in Japan as well as in other developed countries (see Fleischer, 2008, for an exception). Nevertheless, they are mostly depicted not as victims but as opportunity seekers, using women from developed countries to gain access to legal residency in the country of their choice. The current research is one of the first attempts to study the marriage strategies and experiences of male immigrants in Japan, and the first to focus on Sub-Saharan Africans[4],[5]. Like Nakamatsu (2002) did for foreign wives, I argue that for these foreign husbands too, limited views of their marriages as scam marriages do not do justice to the complexity of their motivations to marry and the realities of their lives in Japan.

Method

This study is based on 5 months of fieldwork in Tokyo in 2008-2009. I used different strategies to come into contact with African immigrants and their Japanese wives. I was able to participate in activities where I met African immigrants and their families, such as the African Japan Kids Club. I went to African bars and restaurants in and around Tokyo, to international cultural festivals and to a screening of a movie produced by a Nigerian immigrant on the lives of Nigerians in Tokyo. I

[4] To my knowledge, no studies in English exist on African immigrants in Japan and although some Japanese scholars have started to explore the subject, due to the absence of translation to English their work is largely inaccessible to non-Japanese speaking scholars
[5] The only academic research on African immigrants in Japan I could find comes from a group of anthropologists at Nagoya University (2008). So far, these results are available only in Japanese.

conducted informal conversations, participant observations, in depth interviews, and expert interviews in order to understand the experiences of these international couples.

In general, people were very willing to cooperate with my research although many wondered why a researcher from the Netherlands would study the lives of African immigrants in Japan. In initial meetings I always explained my reasons and answered any questions they might have.[6] Being a `fellow foreigner` in Japan, I felt African respondents felt comfortable talking to me about difficulties they experienced in dealing with the Japanese. Nevertheless, some methodological difficulties also presented themselves. In some cases, it was difficult to get a clear answer on the legal status –of especially recent- immigrants.

I decided to focus on immigrants from Sub-Sahara Africa instead of immigrants of a particular country not only because numbers of immigrants per country are low but also since immigrants from sub-Sahara Africa experience similar modes of reception in Japan and have similar pathways of incorporation.[7] The results for this study are based on 10 in-depth interviews with African immigrant males between 24-55 years of age, who came to Japan as recently as 1 year ago or had been living in Japan for already 24 years. Their educational background and socio-economic status in their country of origin before migration to Japan varied, but nevertheless all of them had at least finished secondary education and half of them had attended university[8]. All of them were economically active, either working as low-skilled employees in Japanese companies or

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[6] In many cases, respondents were curious about the lives of African immigrants in the Netherlands and asked me about immigration policies and possible business opportunities in the Netherlands

[7] This is different for immigrants of Northern-Africa from Egypt, Tunesia and Algeria, whom in Japan are often perceived as white and who are more likely to migrate as a family or to reunite with their family in Japan

[8] Higher educated immigrants are overpresented in Japan due to legal restrictions on migration that make it easier for immigrants to enter the country as students or trainees. It is assumed that in general it is not the people who are worst of in the country of origin that migrate, and this is even more the case for people coming to Japan, which is difficult and expensive to reach.

as entrepreneurs in different areas (restaurant owners, musicians, car-business). These in-depth interviews are supplemented with informal conversations with other African immigrants, expert interviews and in-depth interviews with five Japanese wives of African immigrants.

African immigrants in Japan

The Japanese government estimates that around 11 000 Africans were living in Japan in 2007, with approximately 8000 of them coming from sub-Saharan Africa. Over one-third of these are registered as living in Tokyo. African immigrants in Japan originate from a vast number of sub-Saharan African countries with the largest groups coming from Nigeria (2523) and Ghana (1884), followed at a distance by those from Kenya (523), Uganda (459) Tanzania (371) Senegal (269) Cameroon (261) and Congo (259). Only several hundreds of Africans have received refugee status in Japan, mostly from Ethiopia and Somalia. The gender balance in all groups[9] is very uneven with more than 80 per cent of all African immigrants being male. For predominantly Muslim countries such as Senegal and Nigeria the percentage of female migrants is less than 10 per cent (MOJ, Japan 2007). Although the overall number of African immigrants in Japan is still small, their number has increased rapidly since they started arriving in the 1980`s when the economic situation in many African countries deteriorated while Japan was experiencing a booming economy. For example, while there were only 44 Nigerians registered in Japan in 1985 their number increased to 1315 in 1993 and 2405 in 2005 (Kawada, 2007).

The first African immigrants[10] to arrive in Japan in the 1980`s are believed to have come

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[9] Except for the refugee groups
[10] This excludes embassy personnel

from Ghana. There is anecdotal evidence that they were working in the middle-east at the time

and heard from middle-eastern return-migrants[11] about the opportunities in Japan. In those days

it was still relatively easy to obtain a tourist visa for Japan and renew it every 3-months by briefly

leaving the country, or to enroll in a Japanese language school and receive a cultural visa which

was valid for one or two years and allowed one to work a certain number of hours a week. Since

most of the earlier immigrants from Africa were single males, family reunification did not occur

often, yet chain migration did happen when the first immigrants told friends back home about the

opportunities in Japan.

Japan has a hierarchical system of classification and regulation, and distinguishes not only

between ethnically Japanese and non-Japanese, but also between the different legal statuses of

migrants[12]. Although recently visa requirements for Japan have become much stricter and it has

become very difficult for people from Africa to legally enter Japan, some of the established earlier

immigrants still are able to sponsor relatives to come to Japan, for example to study at Japanese

universities.

African immigrants experience different modes of reception and pathways of

incorporation compared to the ethnically Japanese and Asian immigrants who make up the largest

share of Japan's immigrant population. For example, whereas Nikkei-jin guest workers were at

least temporarily welcomed and wanted as workers in Japan[13] (Tsuda, 2003), African migrants are

confronted with quite different legal and political conditions concerning access to the labor

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[11] In the `80`s quite a number of middle-East immigrants came to Japan, especially from Iran, since visa`s were easily obtained in those days

[12] See Tsuda (2005) for an overview of the migration policy framework in Japan

[13] Although with the recent global financial crisis also hitting Japan, many Nikkei-jin and other immigrants who were on temporary contracts have been laid off and are facing enormous difficulties or have been forced to return home.

market, right to residency, and family reunification regulations. Moreover, although Nikkei-jin are seen as ethnically Japanese and therefore as less foreign, African immigrants stand out in Japanese society both racially and culturally. Assimilation is believed to be especially difficult in Japan because of its geographic isolation, ethnic homogeneity and exceptionalist culture.

Perceptions of international marriages by African immigrants

Marriage as a privilege

When I started my fieldwork it was actually not my intention to focus on African –Japanese marriages but to study the process of incorporation and integration of African immigrants in Japan. However, soon I was struck by the number of informants who told me they were married to, or were dating , a Japanese woman. Part of this phenomenon can be explained by simple demographics; Most African immigrants arrived in Japan during their family-formation age, between 20-40 years of age. Only few had (or admitted to having) families in their country of origin already. Finally, the sex-ratio in the African population in Japan is extremely uneven, reducing the opportunities for African men to meet African women.

These demographics are nonetheless insufficient to explain the high rate of intermarriage, not only since it does not take into account the motives of Japanese women to marry African immigrants, but also since many African men seem to prefer to marry Japanese women for more reasons than just demographic ones. For example, quite some single informants expressed to me their desire to get married to a Japanese girl and even asked my advice on where to best meet `nice` Japanese girls. Nice meaning serious, hardworking and ready to get married. Although it would be easy to classify these marriages as `marriages of conveniences` for the sake of securing a

resident permit, this would not do justice to the African-Japanese couples who had been married for many years and created a fulfilling family life for themselves in Japan. Although `scam` marriages no doubt occur, and anecdotal evidence of Japanese women being paid to marry immigrants to secure papers exists, most marriages are not conducted for the sole purpose of papers. For example, informants who arrived in Japan during the first wave of African migration to Japan had already secured residence permits through other channels before they got married to a Japanese. Moreover, quite a number of marriages have existed for many more years than the 5 years it would take for an immigrant to secure an independent residence permit.

Being married to a Japanese offers immigrants advantages beyond just the personal relationship nevertheless. For example, setting up a transnational business between Japan and Africa is a popular way of making a living in Japan among African immigrants. Most buy second hand cars or car parts in Japan, -which are relatively cheap in Japan, and popular in Africa because of their reliability- and ship them in containers to their country of origin where a business partner sells them. Setting up such a business is by no means easy; legal documents tend to be in Japanese only and to buy cars at special auction sites you need a Japanese guarantor. According to one single informant:

> Life in Japan is much easier if you have a Japanese wife. The Japanese don`t trust foreigners so you always need a Japanese guarantor if you want to rent a house or set up a business. Even at the car auction, you need a Japanese to set up an account for you. Also, all paperwork is in Japanese. Whom better than your own wife to help you with this? I noticed all successful Africans are married to a Japanese wife!
> (3 2 year old single man from Cameroon, in Japan since 2 years and actively looking for Japanese girlfriend)

Indeed, it was not uncommon for Japanese wives to write applications for jobs or even accompanying their spouses to job interviews. According to one of my informants this was not

only beneficial for translating purposes, but also for showing the prospective employer this African was married to a Japanese national and therefore more 'in-group'. One respondent told me:

> My wife is not only my wife but also my manager. When I arrived in Japan 20 years ago as a musician, she arranged for me to perform in clubs and restaurants and she has been doing so ever since. It would be difficult for me to arrange this myself.
> (55 year old male from DR Congo, married and living in Japan since 20 years, 1 son)

Role of the state

One of my African informants pointed out the role of the state in `promoting` African-Japanese marriages. Since nowadays marriage is basically the only pathway to permanent residence, he claimed the Japanese government `forced` immigrants to try to find a Japanese wife. Although no one admitted to be in a relationship just for the papers, it is obviously an important side effect, especially for immigrants with insecure status (compare Fleischer, 2008). Indeed, in terms of rights, sociologists have classified "spouses of Japanese nationals" as one of the most privileged groups among foreigners, particularly in comparison with the vulnerability of undocumented migrants (Ito, 2005).

Marriage market

Notwithstanding the relatively large number of African-Japanese marriages, it is by no means easy for African immigrants to get married to a Japanese. During my interviews with African males as well as Japanese wives, three main reasons were put forward for this: Discrimination, cultural differences and outside parties. The overall number of Africans in Japan is still small, and few Japanese have personal relationships with Africans. Even fewer have ever visited the African continent. As a result, the Japanese attitude towards African immigrants can be described as ambiguous and negative stereotypes are increased by remarks from politicians and media reports.

Most of my male informants were of the opinion that Africans in Japan were portrayed negatively in the media, and sometimes, by politicians. Newspapers and magazines frequently run articles on how Africans –especially Nigerians- have become increasingly involved in Tokyo`s night life and entertainment business. Some incidences of credit-card fraud and bill-padding practices have increased the negative image of Nigerian owned businesses. Moreover, in 2007, Shintaro Ishihara, the provocative Tokyo governor, claimed that foreigners were behind the rising crime rate in Japan. When challenged on this statement a week later, he told his interviewers to go to the Roppongi entertainment district in Tokyo and see for themselves:

> `Africans –and I do not mean African-Americans- who do not speak English are there doing who knows what` (Japantimes.co.jp feb 18th 2007).

It is interesting to note that Ishihara referred specifically to Africans, not to Black people in general. Some scholars have argued Japan is a racist society much like the USA (Hughes, 2003) and several African-American academics have claimed racism towards (all) Black people is common in Japan and was imported from the USA during the occupation years (Russel,). However, most of my informants felt it was not their skin color but them originating from the developing world, that put them in a disadvantageous position. African immigrants felt it was not their blackness that prevented some girls from dating them but the fact they were from Africa. As one single respondent who arrived in Japan just the previous year told me:

> It is not so easy to get a relationship with a Japanese girl. I noticed that it is much easier if I pretend to be an African-American, they like Americans. But when I tell them I am from Africa, no one is interested. People in Japan think Africa is a backward continent, where everyone is poor, uneducated and sick. This is the image presented to them in the news. African-Americans are black too, but they are perceived as cool!
> (24 year old single man from Cameroon, in Japan since one year).

For this reason, one Nigerian man did not tell his wife to be he was Nigerian instead of African-American until the day he was forced to present his passport at the city hall where their marriage was to be registered[14].

Even if Japanese women enter a relationship with an African immigrant, other problems can arise. International marriage is in itself a site of negotiation in terms of language, food, way of life, sense of household economics, and so on. Cultural differences can become problematic, for example when partners do not share an interest in (the same) religion. Most of my African informants were practicing Christians, a faith only few Japanese adhere to. Although in some relations this difference in religion was not seen as problematic at all, others mentioned trying –and mostly failing- to convert their partners to Christianity.

Finally, there is also the effect of `third parties`. My female respondents told me that in general family and friends did not immediately reacted positively to their relation with someone from Africa. Especially parents were afraid their daughter was being used for papers or just simply thought Japanese culture and African culture were not compatible. Relationships indeed did not always work out and although exact figures are lacking, the general belief is that quite some relationships between Africans and Japanese do not survive. One of my respondents had several serious relationships in Japan, yet at 35 finds himself successful yet single in Tokyo. He told me recently he often wonders what could have been.

> Nowadays, I often feel a sense of loss. When I go back to Nigeria, all the girls I was in school with have married and have children yet I am still alone. I`ve had several relationships with Japanese girls, but in the end, none of them worked out. Sometimes I feel that by coming to Japan I was able to become successful economically but I have wasted my time to create a family. (single, 35 years old, in Japan for 15 years, successful entrepreneur, permanent residence permit).

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[14] Apparently, although surprised, the woman did not cancel the marriage.

Japanese wives

It`s clear that in most cases being married to a Japanese has some advantages for African immigrants beyond just the personal aspects of a relationship. But what is `in it` for Japanese wives? Kelsky (2001) argues that international marriages between Japanese women and foreign men symbolize a rejection on the part of the women of Japan and its traditional gender relations. Although her book focuses on marriages between Japanese women and Western men, the general idea of `escape' from the strict Japanese society by exploring different cultures and traveling abroad can be transferred to my respondents as well. For example, one thing that my Japanese informants had in common was their interest in, and openness towards, different cultures.

Places to meet

Some African-Japanese couples had met at events such as the Africa Festa, an annual event organized in Japan, sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and African embassies in Tokyo and the Kanagawa prefecture. The `African Festa` is a 2-day outdoor event drawing thousands of visitors aimed to promote wide-spread understanding and support for Africa. It includes music and dance performances by African musicians and African-Japanese dance groups as well as the promotion of African culture and tourism and the exhibition of African products. People can experience African dishes and in the "Workshop Corner," and "Fashion Corner" they can experience the culture, musical instruments, and clothing of Africa. Moreover, NGO`s present their work and awareness is raised about development issues in Africa. Others had met while practicing African music and dance as a hobby, and other couples had met randomly in the city or at university. Two of my informants even met their African husbands while they were traveling in

Africa. Both stayed in touch for quite some time and eventually applied for a spouse visa so their partners could join them in Japan. Wives told me they found their spouses easy going, talkative and interested in them, qualities that compared positively to previous experiences in relationships with Japanese men.

Power

In general, wives in Japanese couples are seen as powerless compared to their spouses who have usually better jobs and higher incomes. Several studies have tried to counter these images by stating that Japanese (house) wives have considerable power within the household, often control finances and make all decisions in their children`s lives (Lebra,).Nevertheless, in terms of legal rights, for example after divorce, or rights within the workplace, Japanese women still do not hold the same position as their husbands and many studies show Japanese husbands are quite uninvolved with household chores and childcare. Kelsky (2001) states international marriages might seem like an opportunity for Japanese women to gain more gender equal relationships. In African-Japanese marriages the power of the wife in the relationship is considerable since not only spouses may depend on them for their legal status but also since they are indispensable as sources of help for dealing with Japanese bureaucracy, employment and so on. Several wives mentioned that they felt their marriages were more equal than those of the Japanese couples they knew.

All of my informants had difficulties in convincing their families to accept their partner choice. Parents often held stereotypical ideas about Africans or were afraid their daughters were being used for residence permits. One woman stated that her parents basically believed that all Africans in Japan were criminals. These conflicts with parents were very stressful for the Japanese wives and it took them a lot of strength to continue their decision. Nevertheless, in most cases parents

eventually accepted the marriage and especially after the birth of a child they accepted and supported the new family. One person told me her husband now gets along very well with her parents and her parents often comment on how easy her husband is to talk to. Nevertheless, not all family members always supported the marriage and in several cases contact between the African-Japanese couple and more distant relatives had been broken off. Dealing with official institutions and experiencing racism through them is also frequently mentioned by Japanese wives when discussing their experiences of marriages to African immigrants. One woman told me how she and her husband went to the police station to report their car stolen. She was shocked when instead of filing a report the police officer started questioning her husband about his papers and activities.

Children

Although the birth of a child usually resulted in greater acceptance of the marriage by family and friends, Japanese wives faced different challenges after their children were born. Bi-racial children are still very rare in Japan and unfortunately can experience racism in the neighborhood and at school. According to my informants, especially Black-Japanese children can face such discrimination and Japanese schools have no experience in dealing with issues of discrimination. Parents were actively involved in helping their children with such negative experiences. For example, one African father went to his son`s school to tell the children about his background and his country while one of the Japanese mothers ordered material from the United States to educate her children about racism. It was also a Japanese mother of bi-racial children who founded the Africa Japan Kids Club, to create a place with fun activities for African-Japanese children to meet each other and see there are more children like them. Nevertheless, very few bi-racial children

had ever visited their father`s country of origin and only some had met any of their fathers relatives. Most children spoke only Japanese and spoke Japanese with their father as well so that most bi-racial children were actually not really bi-cultural.

Conclusion

Despite an image of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, the immigrant population in Japan is increasing and international marriages are becoming more and more common. Although traditionally most international marriages in Japan were conducted between Japanese women and American service men, the majority of international marriages in Japan nowadays consist of Japanese spouses and Asian wives. This article explored unions less common between sub-Saharan African husbands and Japanese wives living in Japan. In general, the motivations for and experiences of foreign husbands in international marriage are highly under-researched yet they are mostly depicted as opportunity seekers, using women from developed countries to gain access to legal residency. In this study I argue that for these foreign husbands common held views of their marriages as scam marriages do not do justice to the complexity of their motivations to marry and the realities of their lives in Japan. At the same time, Japanese wives are not naïve women who are taken advantage of by scrupulous fortune seekers. They have their own motivations for entering an international marriage that can offer them a way out of the strict hierarchical gender relations in Japanese culture and give access to a more independent lifestyle. Nevertheless, I do not want to over-romanticize these unions either. Legal restrictions imposed by the state and possible objections by family members contribute to the difficulties these inter-racial couples face and

discrimination in Japan of not only the husband but also of bi-racial children are challenges these couples have to deal with.

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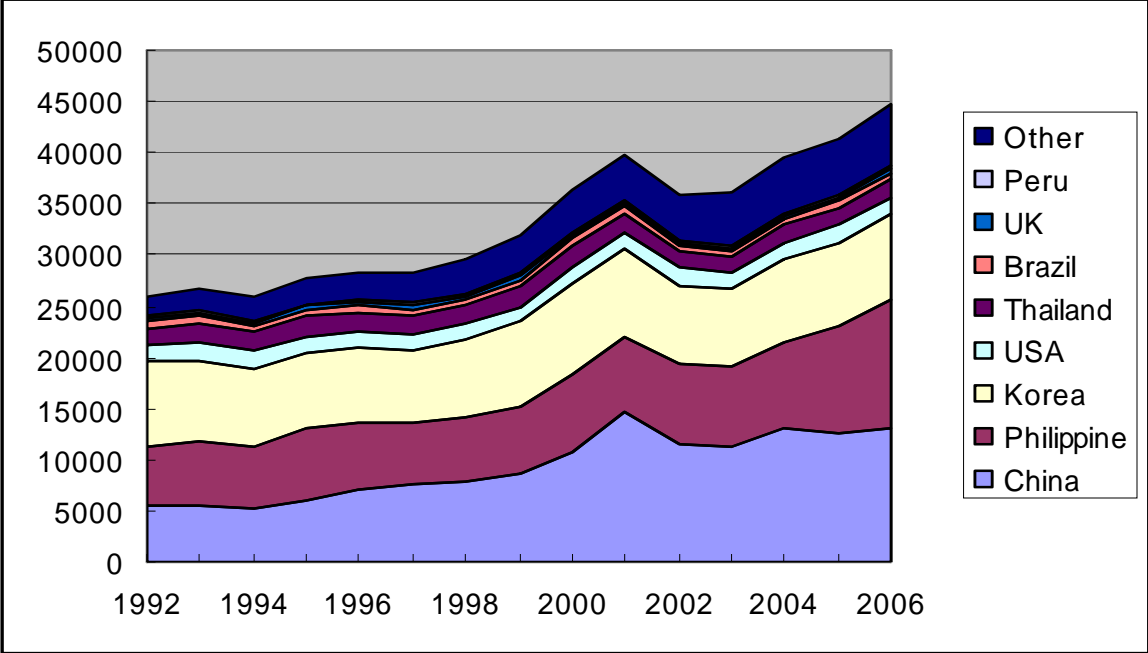transnational perspective. New York: Columbia University press.

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Table 1. Trend of international marriage in Japan
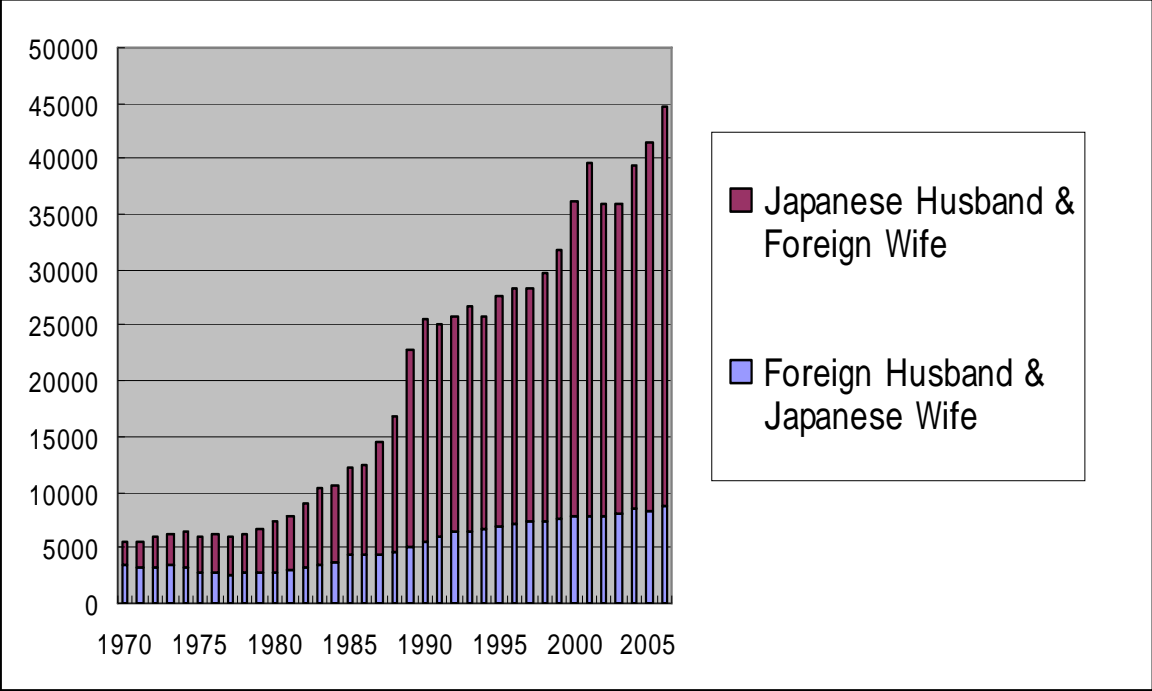
Source: Yoshitaka Ishigawa

Table 2. Nationality composition of foreign spouses

Source: Yoshitaka Ishigawa