‘Entangled in Tokyo’: Exploring Diverse Pathways of Labor Market Incorporation of African Immigrants in Japan

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Abstract

In this article I explore employment practices and pathways of labor market incorporation of sub-Saharan African immigrants in Japan. Based on secondary information as well as 5 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo and its suburbs, I will first describe the history of migration from Africa to Japan and the current demographic characteristics of African immigrants in Japan. I will then continue to describe the employment practices of African immigrants to explore questions surrounding integration, incorporation, and the use of human and social capital in the Japanese context. My findings give a first indication of the mechanisms behind the diverse trajectories, especially highlighting the importance of entrepreneurship, transnational ties with the country of origin, and ties with Japanese nationals in facilitating labor market incorporation. Finally, attention is also given to the role of the Japanese state in facilitating or hindering opportunities for employment.

Keywords

South-East migration, labor market incorporation, African migration, African migrants in Japan

Résumé

Dans cet article, j'explore les pratiques d'emploi et les voies d'incorporation au marché du travail des immigrés d'Afrique sub-saharienne, au Japon. Sur base d'une information secondaire, et de 5 mois de travail ethnographique de terrain, à Tokyo et dans sa banlieue, je commence par dépeindre l'histoire de la migration depuis l'Afrique vers le Japon, et les caractéristiques démographiques actuelles des immigrés africains au Japon. Je continue en décrivant les pratiques d'emploi des immigrés africains pour explorer les questions qui entourent l'intégration, l'incorporation et l'usage du capital humain et social dans le contexte japonais. Mes découvertes donnent une

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première indication des mécanismes qui existent derrière les diverses trajectoires, mettant particulièrement en lumière l'importance de la stratégie d'entreprise, des liens transnationaux avec le pays d'origine, et des liens avec les nationaux japonais, dans la facilitation de l'incorporation au marché du travail. Enfin, j'accorde aussi de l'attention au rôle de l'état japonais dans la facilitation ou l'entrave aux possibilités d'emploi.

Mots-clés

migration sud-est, incorporation au marché du travail, migration africaine, migrants africains au Japon

Introduction

Over the last decades migration has emerged as a central issue in the international economic and political scene and as a crucial factor of societal change for many countries (Castles and Miller 2003). Migration is now considered to be a global phenomenon with the boundaries between countries of immigration and countries of emigration shifting. Even countries previously untouched by large global population movements, such as Japan, have now become reluctant countries of immigration (Douglass and Roberts 2003; Cornelius and Tsuda 2004). This research hopes to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the emergence of 'new African diasporas' (Koser 2003) in which Asia in general and Japan in particular have so far mostly been neglected. The article provides background characteristics of African immigrants in Japan and discusses their motivation to come to Japan. Drawing on data gathered during 5 months of fieldwork in Tokyo and its suburbs in 2008-2009, this research contributes to a broader understanding of employment practices among African immigrants and their incorporation in the Japanese labor market.

The literature on international migration shows that immigrants often experience difficulties in finding suitable employment in their destination country. Different models exist to explain these difficulties, based on human capital approaches, segmented labor market theories and social network theory. However, most research on labor market incorporation of immigrants originates from the USA and Europe and results might not necessarily be cross-culturally applicable to societies with different labor market conditions such as Japan (Cornelius and Tsuda 2002). The current paper joins the few existing studies on labor market incorporation of immigrants in Japan (Cornelius and Tsuda 2002; Takenoshita 2006) yet is the first to focus on the experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrants.

African Immigrants in Japan

Although Japan has recently seen the number of immigrants grow to over 2 million people, immigrants still make up less than 2 percent of the total population. This is a very small percentage compared to other industrialized nations in North America and Europe. Immigrants in Japan nowadays come from a large number of countries and through a variety of channels and routes (students, international marriage, contract labor migration, legal entry with the use of tourist visas, trafficking). Various categories of migrants exist in Japan: Japanese return migrants, professional (elite) migrants, spouses of Japanese nationals, nurses, (trafficked) sex workers and refugees. A special category of immigrants is the so-called trainee, an individual accepted by a public or private organization in Japan to enter a training program to learn industrial techniques or skills. This program was established to promote cooperation with developing countries. In reality, many foreign trainees from developing countries, including from Africa, have been employed as low-skilled workers to compensate for labor shortages (Terasawa 2003).

The vast majority of immigrants in Japan come from other Asian countries such as Korea China and the Philippines, or are so-called *nikkei-jin*, Japanese return migrants from Brazil and Peru. The remaining group of non-Japanese is very diverse and consists of mainly US citizens, a wide variety of Europeans, Australians, Asians, and finally Africans. Although nowadays non-Japanese can be found all over the country, they are heavily concentrated in the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama, and the more industrial areas surrounding this conglomerate.

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 believed that illegal immigrants in Japan are 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 expires¹ (Shipper 2005). Japan accepts very few refugees. In total, only 16,000 refugees live in Japan, most of them originating from Indochina.

The Japanese government estimates around 11,000 Africans were living in Japan in 2007, with approximately 8,000 of them coming from sub-Saharan

¹ In 2005 the number of visa over-stayers was 207,000 while the total unauthorized population was estimated to be 250,000.

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 (2,523) and Ghana (1,884), 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 among all nationalities except the refugee groups is very uneven with more than 80 percent of all African immigrants in Japan being male. For predominantly Muslim countries such as Senegal and Nigeria the percentage of female migrants is less than 10 percent (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 1980s 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 1,315 in 1993 and 2,405 in 2005 (Kawada 2007).

The first African immigrants to arrive in Japan in the 1980s are believed to have come from Ghana. There is anecdotal evidence that they were working in the Middle East at the time and heard from Middle Eastern return migrants about the opportunities in Japan.² In those days it was still relatively easy for African immigrants to obtain a tourist visa for Japan and renew it every three months by briefly leaving the country or by enrolling in a Japanese language school and receiving 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. Although recent 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 are still able to sponsor relatives to come to Japan, for example to study at Japanese universities.

Nevertheless, 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. For example, in 2007,

² In the 1980s quite a number of immigrants from the Middle East came to Japan, especially from Iran, since visas were easily obtained by Iranians in those days.

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 (Japan Times 2008).

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 (Japan Times 2011).

Previous studies have argued that Japan's relative isolation and emphasis on racial and cultural homogeneity leads to discrimination against foreigners. Some African-American scholars have argued this is especially the case for Black people since Japan imported American racism during the post-war occupation (Russell 1991; Hughes 2003). Several newspapers also reported how African immigrants were stopped by police in Japan to have their papers checked 'just because they were Black' and in at least one high-profile case a Nigerian immigrant sued the Japanese police force after he was harassed by a police officer while handing out flyers for a club in Shinjuku and lost his ability to walk.

Nevertheless, many Japanese people are genuinely interested in foreign cultures, including African culture. For example, an annual 'African Festa' is 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 widespread 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, NGOs present their work and awareness is raised about development issues in Africa.

This Study

Most studies on immigrant incorporation into the labor market have focused on the USA and Europe while studies on immigration and integration in

Japan so far have been concerned mostly with ethnic return migrants (Tsuda 2003) and female immigrant sex workers from other Asian countries (Parrenas 2006). The labor market incorporation of African immigrants might show very different patterns compared to that of Asian immigrants and *Nikkei-Jin* though. Whereas *Nikkei-jin* guest workers were at least temporarily welcomed and wanted as workers in Japan, African migrants are confronted with difficult legal and political conditions concerning their access to the labor market, right to residency, and family reunification regulations.³ 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. Whereas many studies on immigrant integration assume some form of (cultural) assimilation on the parts of immigrants, assimilation is believed to be especially difficult in Japan because of its geographic isolation, ethnic homogeneity, and exceptionalist culture. This study is based on five months of fieldwork in Tokyo from 2008-2009. Though the field study was intentionally exploratory, it nonetheless followed a structured research design. During the interviews, retrospective life histories were discussed with a focus on life in Japan, and specifically employment and social relations. Since there is no baseline survey of African immigrants in Japan, and no complete list of the target population, I used different strategies to come into contact with African immigrants. For example, I was able to participate in activities where I met African immigrants and their families, such as the African Japan Kids Club. In addition, I went to African bars and restaurants, international cultural festivals, and a screening of a movie produced by a Nigerian immigrant on the lives of Nigerians in Tokyo. These different gateways allowed me to come into contact with African immigrants of different national origins, of various educational backgrounds, and with various lengths of stay in Japan. I conducted informal conversations, participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and expert interviews in order to understand the employment experiences of African immigrants in Japan and their strategies to try to succeed. This explorative research approach enabled me to review my research questions throughout the entire study, and to go back into the field to explore different directions and areas. The findings in the current paper are mainly based on 15 in-depth interviews with African immigrant males between 24 and 55 years of age. They represent different educational backgrounds, ranging from a minimum of secondary school to Bachelor level. One informant came to Japan as recently as one year ago while two have been living in Japan for more than 20 years. All the men in the sample

³ See Tsuda (2005) for an overview of the migration policy framework in Japan.

are of Christian background. Their reasons for migration and mode of entry to Japan are diverse. Although most came with the clear intention to work in Japan, two came as dependents of their Japanese wives whom they met in Africa, and some initially entered on student or trainee visas, or as tourists. None of my informants had claimed asylum in Japan. Interviews took place in public settings such as cafes and restaurants, were conducted in English, and lasted between 1 and 4 hours, depending on how much informants had to say. Informants received a 3,000 yen (approximately USD30) gift certificate from a department store to thank them for their time and effort. These in-depth interviews were complemented with informal conversations with other African immigrants, expert interviews, and information from in-depth interviews with 5 Japanese wives of African immigrants.

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.⁴ Being a ‘fellow foreigner’ in Japan, I felt respondents felt comfortable talking to me about difficulties they experienced in dealing with the Japanese. Nevertheless, some methodological difficulties also presented themselves. For example, 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-Saharan Africa instead of immigrants from a particular country not only because numbers of immigrants per country are low but also since immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa experience similar modes of reception in Japan and have similar pathways of incorporation. This differs for immigrants from northern Africa who 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.

Findings

Regular Labor Market

Although most of my respondents believe it will never be possible for African immigrants to completely assimilate and ‘pass’ as Japanese, for both racial and

⁴ In many cases, the 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.

cultural reasons, some of the earlier African immigrants have integrated into Japanese society very well and were able to secure a position in the regular labor market. This was facilitated by the fact that in the 1980s enrolling in a Japanese language school was an important strategy to obtain legal status in Japan. Learning the language is an important aspect of being able to integrate into Japanese society and to make contact with Japanese people, who rarely speak English. Moreover, the economic boom that Japan experienced at the time made it possible for some to obtain a permanent contract in their company, which is, under the Japanese 'life-long-employment system' an important factor in securing increasing wages, annual bonuses, and in being able to purchase a house. Although these African immigrants hold blue collar jobs and cannot work their way up to a managerial position in their companies due to the strictly hierarchical system in Japanese companies that mostly exclude foreigners, they have a privileged position compared to other immigrants due to their permanent contract. In general, they also feel accepted in their companies. As this 45 year old factory worker who speaks perfect Japanese explains:

I have been working at my company for more than 20 years. I've become very good friends with some of my co-workers and on the weekends I even sometimes play golf with the company president!

Occasionally, African immigrants who came to Japan on scholarships provided by the Japanese government under international exchange programs at that time also stayed in Japan and have made it in exceptional cases to professor at Japanese Universities. Some of these earlier immigrants even applied for and were granted Japanese nationality. Even though they naturalized mostly for practical reasons – making it easier to obtain visas for other countries – it does strengthen their bond with Japan, with one of my informants claiming that he does not even want his body to be sent back to Ghana when he dies.

Employment in the regular labor market characterizes especially the first wave of African immigrants to Japan and has become increasingly difficult to obtain for more recently arrived immigrants due to the harshening of migration laws and the economic recession in Japan. African immigrants have had (voluntarily or not) to find other opportunities to incorporate themselves into the Japanese labor market.

Performing Culture

African immigrants have little chance of 'blending in' in Japan. Instead, some of them make the most of their 'otherness' by actively presenting themselves as representatives of their culture. African musicians perform in 'live houses'

in Japan and some have started their own bands and offer workshops in, for example, African drums (Djembe). For example, M. was a musician in Africa already before coming to Japan 15 years ago, after his marriage to a Japanese woman whom he met in Kenya. With the help of his wife, he managed to make a living as a musician in Japan as well and has performed in live houses and at parties as well as in professional musicals all over Japan. He claims though, that there are also Africans who take advantage of the fact that many Japanese believe all African people have a talent for music and offer Djembe workshops at 3,000 yen an hour while they have little actual experience or training in music. African dance has also become quite popular in Japan recently and some Japanese groups have become very good under the guidance of their African instructors.

Performing culture does not necessarily rely only on *ethnic* identity alone. One of my informants used his musical talent and *religious* identity to create a successful business singing Christian gospel songs at Japanese weddings.⁵

A special category within this group is the few Africans who are so-called *tarentos* (talents) in Japan. *Tarentos* are TV stars in Japan, who do not really have any special skills or talents but act as side-kicks for the presentators, participate in all kind of games, and offer their opinion on any subject that comes up. Over the years, some African *tarentos* have become famous in Japan with recently the Nigerian Bobby Olgun being the most famous one. Within the 5 months I spent in Japan I saw him appear on at least 6 different television programs even though I did not watch Japanese television a lot. Bobbi – as he is called on TV – is married to a Japanese woman, speaks near perfect Japanese, and has his own website and blog in Japanese. Nevertheless, he is popular precisely because he is seen as *different* and often emphasizes his African background.

Transnationalism

In Japan, the most obvious example of using transnational ties as a strategy for success is the African immigrants who are involved in what they call the ‘container business’ or in other words, buying second-hand cars and car parts in Japan, and shipping them back to Africa to sell. People involved in this business tend to live in Saitama, a suburb to the north of Tokyo, where many car makers have their factories and where there is a large second-hand car auction sight,

⁵) Japanese weddings are often performed in chapels with ceremonies performed by white ‘priests’ – usually exchange students or English teachers with no religious authority – and having Christian songs performed adds authenticity.

or in Yokohama, close to Japan's large international port. The most successful entrepreneurs travel back and forth between Japan and their country of origin frequently and have business partners back in their home country. Although some African immigrants indeed have done very well for themselves in the 'container business,' not everyone has succeeded since some people start without the appropriate knowledge or capital. As one informant explained:

When Africans see someone succeeding in a certain area, they all want to jump on the bandwagon. However, the fact that all of a sudden everyone is doing the same thing actually makes our chances to succeed decrease.

Transnational involvement is not limited to the car business. One informant working in the video production field had recently set up a movie editing business with a partner in the heart of Nigeria's booming movie industry (Nollywood) with equipment he purchased in Japan. He had already produced one movie shot partly in Japan and partly in Nigeria and made the newspapers in both countries with this accomplishment.

'African' Ethnic Entrepreneurship

Much has been written on ethnic businesses, reflecting the growth of self-employment in immigrant populations in many countries in recent decades (Rath 2002). Whereas sometimes immigrants are forced into self-employment when the regular labor market is closed to them either by legal restrictions or racism, African immigrants seem to have a preference for self-employment and business ownership as a goal in itself. Indeed, many Africans in Japan are self-employed and the fact that the African community in Japan increased actually created opportunities for self-employment among some immigrants. Along the *Tobu Isesaki* line, a train line connecting Tokyo and Saitama, several African restaurants have emerged in recent years, catering towards respectively the Cameroonian, Ghanaian, and Nigerian community – although these establishments are not frequented by only one ethnic group. The restaurants/bars provide an opportunity for people to meet after work and on the weekends, listen to African music and eat African food. One Nigerian restaurant/bar also sells a wide variety of African products, ranging from food items to hair gel and African movies. Very few Japanese come to these places. However, in the case of the African restaurants/bars in the center of Tokyo, African customers mix with Japanese customers and at least in one case the majority of customers are actually Japanese.

Fair trade shops selling products from Africa also mainly cater towards Japanese customers, as do the clothing stores set up by African immigrants in

Harajuku, the capital of youth fashion in Tokyo. These clothing stores emerged several years ago, when American hip-hop music became very popular in Japan, and several African entrepreneurs were selling ‘street wear’ as seen in hip-hop video productions. Some African immigrants actually held up the appearance of being African-American themselves to give their shops an authentic image. They felt the Japanese had a very stereotypical image of Africa being poor and underdeveloped whereas African Americans were perceived as ‘cool’ (see also Cornyetz 1994). Several shop owners did very well and some returned to their country of origin with enough money to retire. Although it seems the ‘street wear’ trend is now mostly over, still some (Ghanaian owned) shops exist in Harajuku.

Informal Labor Market

Especially for recently arrived immigrants, who often lack papers, entry into the official labor market is blocked. These immigrants are forced to take jobs in the informal labor market. Studies from the United States have shown such jobs are found mostly in construction, agriculture, domestic service, and child-care. In Japan however, few immigrants are found in agriculture and jobs in domestic service and child-care are taken up by female immigrants, mostly from Asian countries. The male African immigrants in Japan have found other niches. For example, on the streets of entertainment and shopping districts in Tokyo, such as Roppongi and Harajuku, they can be found soliciting potential clients for bars and shops, handing out flyers and discount coupons, or showing pictures of (fake) brand goods for sale. The establishments they are recommending are often (though not always) owned by other Africans, especially Nigerians. They receive salaries mostly based on commission, so their income is very unstable. Several larger nightclubs also employ African immigrants as bouncers. People in this category were not satisfied with the type of jobs they had. Employment in the informal labor market is insecure and often surrounded by illegal practices.⁶ Workers are usually paid in cash, without tax deductions, and wages are below the legal minimum. They often lack any form of insurance. Moreover, most informants were not expecting to end up in these types of jobs when they decided to come to Japan. For example as E. explained, a 24 year old male from Cameroon who arrived in Japan less than a year ago:

⁶ Although a lot of the discussions in the media on the African immigrants visible in the entertainment districts of Roppongi and Shinjuku focuses on their possible involvement in drug-related crime (Friman 2001), I did not manage to talk to representatives of this ‘alternative pathway’ to integration – or at least no one admitted to me being involved in this trade.

When I graduated from college with a degree in engineering, I knew I had to leave Cameroon if I wanted to make something of my life. I hesitated between going to Germany, where some of my relatives live, and Japan. Ever since I was young, I had a fascination with Japan and their technological developments. I have always wanted to work for a big company like Sony or Toyota, so I chose to come to Japan, even though I did not know anyone here.

E. soon realized though it would not be easy to land a job at the engineering department of Sony or Toyota, not in the least since his Japanese language ability is limited. He is now working in the informal labor market and still thinking if maybe he should move to Germany after all.

Social Ties

Social networks, largely based on family and ethnicity, constitute a form of social capital that immigrants can draw upon to improve their economic and social circumstances (Portes 1995). In general, family members are of the same ethnicity, but in Japan, intermarriage rates between African male immigrants and Japanese women are high. International marriages in Japan have been steadily increasing with currently one out of 18 matches in Japan involving a foreign spouse (Roberts 2008). Among Africans, the percentage of immigrants with a spouse visa has been particularly high, with around 20 to 25 percent of Africans staying in Japan on such a visa. Among Nigerians, the percentage even peaked at 45 percent in 2002 (Kojima 2006).

Existing studies on marriage strategies of migrants concentrate on foreign-born women entering a country of destination by relying on marriage to a native-born man. The marriage strategies of male migrants are highly under-researched (see Fleischer 2008 for an exception). Marriages between African men and Japanese women – the vast majority of African-Japanese marriages – can be partly explained by demographic characteristics, such as the uneven sex ratio in the African group and their relatively young age distribution. Legal constraints nevertheless are of importance as well. 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. Marriage can be seen as facilitating labor market incorporation not only because it can grant legal status, but also since Japanese wives can be a source of information on how to obtain a job, start a business, and act as translators. For example, the Japanese wife of an informant who was in the music business became his manager, and arranged performances and music contracts for her husband. Another accompanied her husband to job interviews – not only to translate if necessary, but also to assure the prospective employer her husband belonged

to the Japanese 'in-group' through their marriage. Although most of these inter-ethnic marriages are by no means conducted solely for practical reasons (Schans 2011), the advantages of having a close tie in the Japanese community do not escape the attention of single immigrants. Several younger immigrants who had not lived in Japan for many years expressed their desire to get married to a Japanese woman. 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 a 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!

In general, a close tie with a Japanese citizen is seen as an advantage in the labor market. Especially the earlier immigrants had made some close Japanese friends, mainly through their participation in language schools, who helped them find a job through their own network.

Another type of social tie immigrants can make use of to find employment or improve their labor market position is the ethnic ties they have with members of their own nationality or even with Sub-Saharan immigrants in general. One person told me that when he arrived in Japan in the late 80s with no knowledge of the country and no family or friends in Japan yet, he just walked around in Tokyo and approached the first Black African he saw on the street. This person (from a different nationality) provided him with food and housing for 3 months until he set himself up in Japan. However, ethnic ties are ambiguous. Whereas people in group settings claimed to me they were all 'African brothers' in Japan, being supportive of each other, in individual conversations Ghanaians claimed, for example, the Nigerians had no perseverance on the job and even within the Nigerian community there seems to be some tension between ethnic and religious groups (see also the Nagoya University report 2008). Persons with relatively good, stable jobs were reluctant to recommend acquaintances to their employer since they feared that when the new employee did not perform well, this would reflect badly on them as well.

Discussion

In the literature on international migration, studies on labor market incorporation of immigrants take a prominent place. Such studies use human capital approaches, segmented labor market theories, and social network theory to explain differences in types and levels of (un-) employment between

immigrants and natives, and are usually based on data from the United States and to a lesser extent Europe. In the current paper I present the different pathways of labor market incorporation open to sub-Saharan African immigrants in Japan. Although Japan still has relatively few immigrants compared to other industrialized nations, and African immigrants are a small sub-group compared to Asian immigrants and ethnic Japanese return migrants, their experiences offer some valuable insights. Differences as well as commonalities can be found between Japan and the United States and Europe.

Contrary to findings from the United States and Europe, human capital, especially educational background, seems to be of little importance for African immigrants in Japan where employment is concerned. Very few people find a job in a Japanese company or institution that matches their degree from their country of origin. This is similar to the findings of Cornelius and Tsuda (2002) who claimed ethnicity and gender are more important than educational level and previous experience in the Japanese labor market.

In the regular labor market, African immigrants have to convince Japanese employers of their ability to fit in and therefore rely on social ties in finding jobs. Although reliance on social ties has previously been found to be of importance for immigrants (Sanders et al. 2002; Glick Schiller et al. 2005) research so far has focused on ties with co-ethnics. One of the interesting findings in this study is the reliance of African immigrants on the mediation of their Japanese wives by either helping them with practical issues or acting as a kind of guarantor with Japanese employers. The high rates of intermarriage between African men and Japanese women facilitate the former's labor market incorporation.

As in Europe and the United States, Japan has a segmented labor market and most immigrants can be found in the secondary sector, doing 3K jobs (Kitanai, Kiken, Kitsui, the Japanese version of 3D jobs, dirty, dangerous, and difficult). However, in Japan the distinction between permanent employee and temporary (or part-time) employee is especially important. People in blue-collar jobs but with permanent lifelong positions are relatively well-off due to regular bonuses and a pay scale based on seniority. They work for small but established enterprises that pay legal wages. Compared to those in the informal labor market, with largely illegal labor practices, their position in Japan is much more secure. This finding highlights the importance of taking into account contextual (national) differences when studying labor market incorporation of immigrants.

Also, emphasizing otherness as a form of labor market incorporation is an interesting addition to the literature on labor market incorporation of immigrants in Japan. This pathway of incorporation is facilitated by the relatively

small number of Africans in Japan and the fact that most Japanese are still unfamiliar with African culture.

Transnationalism studies point to an alternative form of economic adaptation of immigrants in advanced societies that is based on the mobilization of their cross-country social networks (Basch et al. 1994; Portes et al. 2002). African immigrants in Japan who have their own transnational business, usually in exporting second-hand cars from Japan to their country of origin are a case in point. The ones who have been in this business for a while already are relatively well-off financially speaking and travel back and forth frequently. Having proper documentation is crucial in this area since undocumented immigrants are prevented from traveling back and forth. The informal economy in contrast draws primarily from recent, undocumented immigrants.

These findings show that the legal constraints imposed by the Japanese nation-state affect African immigrants in various ways, and national policies regulating entry, stay, and work allowance are crucial in facilitating or limiting their options. For those involved in transnational business enterprises, legal status is crucial, since unrestricted opportunities to travel back and forth between Japan and the country of origin facilitates business success. The stricter migration controls and barriers to integrate in Japan have made the option of finding employment in the regular labor market more and more difficult to pursue although ironically, people in this category might be seen as most desirable in Japan, with their ability to speak the language fluently, their permanent jobs – which allow them to purchase houses – and in some cases their Japanese passports.

Since Japan increasingly erects barriers intended to discourage assumed economic immigrants from Africa, new immigrants are forced to develop new strategies in order to be legally included and obtain the right to work. Increasingly, bi-national marriages are the only legal way to obtain residency and the right to work for (undocumented or short-term visa holding) African immigrants. This might result in an increase of marriages of convenience, where immigrants pay Japanese citizens to obtain the right to stay and work in Japan.

Although I present the different pathways for incorporation as distinct categories, the boundaries are not always clear-cut. Marriage to a Japanese wife has proven to be important for success in the transnational second-hand car business and most of the immigrants who find jobs in the regular labor market are or have been married to Japanese. The ethnic entrepreneurs who cater not only to fellow Africans but also to Japanese customers in their bars sometimes dress up in traditional African costume and offer music lessons, thereby

crossing the boundary to the 'performing culture' category. Some ethnic entrepreneurs, such as street vendors of African accessories, are operating actually within the informal labor market.

Clearly, my research is not based on a representative sample. The results only apply to the area of Tokyo and surroundings. Future research could focus, for example, also on the Kansai area where a sizeable group of African immigrants has settled. The current analysis should be viewed as a case study, which needs to be replicated with larger and more representative samples. Nevertheless, this research is the first to examine the labor market incorporation of sub-Saharan African immigrants in Japan and offers valuable comparative insights for the study of immigrant labor market incorporation. This study has also been one of the first to study African immigrants in Japan. Future research on the emergence of a 'new African diaspora' in Japan should investigate further the broader integration of African immigrants in Japan and the relation of integration with the ability to reside legally in Japan.

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