

Segregated Survivor: Sink or Swim?

Contributed by Colleen Boltz
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As the age of reality TV is coming to a close, one of the first ever reality shows is in its last attempt to pull in viewers and has played the race card. Controversy has always been a key element to make the public want to watch more. Mark Burnett, the producer, has acknowledged this fact making Survivor Season 13: Cook Island the most controversial competitive reality show yet. This season is set to have for racially divided tribes, African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American and White, who will initially compete against each other. From the moment the announcement was made that this season's plot was to position certain races against each other, the debate began. Did CBS cross the line by taking this step or will it finally fill the void of an ethnically diverse cast that most reality shows lack?

The controversial aspect is already on the rise with media and the public all voicing their own opinion. "I can't decide if the producers are completely naive and clueless or completely soulless," said Lisa Navarrete, vice president of the National Council of La Raza, a Latino civil rights organization. Although Burnett has stated that this is just a "social experiment"; a large piece of the public feels that this is not a social experiment that they want to relive, again. Throwing the "social experiment" theory in the trash, many feel this is just a desperate and disrespectful attempt to boost what have been dwindling ratings. According to Nielsen Media Research, Survivors last season set in Panama, averaged 16.65 million viewers, a significant drop from the 18 million that tuned in a year earlier. An even bigger disappointment was the first ever drop for the show from the Top 10. Segregation has always been a hot topic, but to Chon Noriega, director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA it isn't the topic that he finds wrong, it's the actions on how CBS put the topic in a show that deals directly with competition and conflict. "There aren't too many models on television of people being comfortable working with other races," said Noriega to The Philadelphia Inquirer. "It's either single-race programming or token programming right now. And then they decide the next alternative is head-to-head racial conflict and racial competition? Maybe they can push it beyond the success of one race detracting from another race," he said. "If they can, they are doing something very innovative. If they can't, they are just being honest." Regardless of the shows beginning focal point on the racial divisions and competition, Host Jeff Probst insists that the show will not focus on racism or hatred. "We're smart enough to not make it negative," Burnett told Entertainment Weekly. "We're smart enough to have gotten rid of every racist person in casting. Probst also stands behind CBS's decision by claiming this is filling the cast with more racially diverse people, thus pleasing the public. This is what the public wanted and should be content with the decision.

On The Early Show Probst defended the decision saying, "The idea for this actually came from the criticism that Survivor was not ethnically diverse enough. Because, for whatever reason, we've always had a low number of minority applicants for the show. So we set out and said, 'Let's turn this criticism into creative for the show.' I think it fits in perfectly with what Survivor does, as it is a social experiment and adding another layer to that experiment, which is taking the show to a completely different level." The Cast of this season had mixed reviews about the tribal divisions. Some were concerned that this would cause stereotyping. Others it did not bother at all and were just there to work as a tribe and win. Eventually the winner of the whole show will have to gain votes from others who were voted off. The winner of the show will in theory have done the best job of merging with every ethnicity. Although this is the first conflicting racial show, it is not the first time for one to air. The Show Black White aired on FX last year. The show dressed an Anglo family to appear African American and vice versa. There was no problem this show, and actually was viewed as successful programming. The difference between Black White and Survivor is clearly the environment and competitive spirit involved in each show. In the end, Probst sums up this season well. "Some people will think this is controversial. Others will think, 'What is the big deal?' Either way, it is going to be very interesting."

Survivor Season 13: Cook Island will premiere on Thursday, September 14 at 8PM ET/7 C on CBS. The twenty castaways who will compete on Survivor: Cook Islands will be:

- Rebecca Borman (African-American Tribe), a 34-year-old make-up artist from Laurelton, NY
- Anh-Tuan "Cao Boi" Bui (Asian-American Tribe), a 42-year-old nail salon manager from Christianburg, VA
- Sekou Bunch (African-American Tribe), a 45-year-old jazz musician/recording artist who currently resides in Los Angeles, CA and is originally from New York, NY
- J.P. Calderon (Hispanic Tribe), a 30-year-old professional volleyball player from Marina Del Rey, CA
- Cristina Coria (Hispanic Tribe), a 35-year-old police officer from Los Angeles, CA
- Stephannie Favor (African-American Tribe), a 35-year-old nursing student from Columbia, SC
- Billy Garcia (Hispanic Tribe), a 36-year-old heavy metal guitarist who currently resides in New York, NY and is originally from Miami, FL
- Adam Gentry (Caucasian Tribe), a 28-year-old copier salesperson who currently resides in San Diego, CA and is originally from Fredericksburg, VA
- Nathan Gonzalez (African-American Tribe), a 26-year-old in retail salesperson from Los Angeles, CA
- Jenny Guzon-Bae (Asian-American Tribe), a 36-year-old real estate agent who currently resides in Lake Forest, IL and is originally from Melrose Park, IL
- Yul Kwon (Asian-American Tribe), a 31-year-old management consultant who currently resides in San Mateo, CA and is originally from Flushing, NY
- Becky Lee (Asian-American Tribe), a 28-year-old attorney who currently resides in Washington, DC and is originally from Pittsburgh, PA
- Oscar "Ozzy" Lusth (Hispanic Tribe), a 25-year-old waiter from Venice, CA

- Cecilia Mansilla (Hispanic Tribe), a 29-year-old technology risk consultant who currently resides in Oakland, CA and is originally from Arequipa, Peru
- Sundra Oakley (African-American Tribe), a 31-year-old working actress who currently resides in Los Angeles, CA and is originally from New York, NY
- Jonathan Penner (Caucasian Tribe), a 44-year-old writer/producer who currently resides in Los Angeles, CA and is originally from New York, NY
- Parvati Shallow (Caucasian Tribe), a 23-year-old boxer and waitress who currently resides in Los Angeles, CA and is originally from Atlanta, GA
- Jessica Smith (Caucasian Tribe), a 27-year-old performance artist and rollergirl from Chico, CA
- Brad Virata (Asian-American Tribe), a 29-year-old fashion director who currently resides in Los Angeles, CA and is originally from Seattle, WA
- Candice Woodcock (Caucasian Tribe), a 23-year-old pre-med student from Fayetteville, NC * cast information and image from <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor13>