

Visualising Heritage Participation by Ethnic Groups

by

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Significant ethnic communities are settled here in Britain because of the engagement of their countries of origin with Britain. Ethnic communities may be concentrated within the inner cities but each one of them is bound to every British person, even in the remotest parts of the countryside, through a common multi-cultural British history.

Towards an inclusive expression of history and heritage in Britain

The time has come for ethnic communities to visibly express their presence in the British past and present. It is time for them to make their legitimate claim and situate themselves within the socio-cultural history and heritage of this country in order to advance from the position of the normal social strength of being rooted in a common history and heritage into the future.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines history as 'The past considered as a whole', and heritage as 'something of special value and worthy of preservation'. Heritage is selective, through researching history and cultural memory, social groups are enabled to proceed to construct a desired heritage that is held up as the positive contributions which mark us as who we are, and which we are proud of.

The significant absence of ethnic groups from many episodes of official history means that they cannot begin to mould their presence and make their contribution towards an inclusive heritage. Many ethnic groups have not yet thought about the significance of inclusive history and heritage projects to their communities.

The work of BEN, constantly putting ethnic participation on the agenda, and the high contemporary status of social inclusion has created a climate for change.

Funding bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund and organisations such as the National Trust, or the Council for

National Parks, and initiatives such as the Local Heritage Initiative are now making important efforts to re-assess the pivotal concepts which draw the boundaries of participation for particular social groups.

It is exciting times. The tasks at hand are momentous.

A necessary sea change in key heritage institutions

Good examples of multi-cultural work and work involving ethnic communities do exist and are very important. However, if one looks across the environmental and heritage sector as a whole - the statutory and voluntary environmental organisations, museums and galleries, the countryside and leisure and recreation services of local authorities, or major funding bodies - social inclusion is haphazard. Access issues are enshrined in policy, but if you ask institutions and organisations if their personnel have the skills to work effectively with ethnic communities, or try to look for focused and consistent positive action, you would be very disappointed.

It is time that those in power, sitting on the boards or management committees of environmental agencies, heritage institutions or leisure services, are asked to stand down if they are not committed to Equal Opportunities, because they are out of step with the contemporary world. They are damaging social progress. Working with disadvantaged and excluded groups is not about doing a favour to small groups of people. It is about working towards a vision of an equal society which we can all be proud of.

We are calling for strategic organisational awareness raising with the view to instigating a sea change in the positions of management boards and senior personnel, resulting in the necessary re-positioning of key heritage institutions:

Moving away from the domination of a mythical and exclusive mono-culture that is no longer relevant to the contemporary world

Filling the gap that is the fact of Britain's multi-cultural history and heritage

The recognition of the essential involvement of ethnic communities in filling the gap that is Britain's multi-cultural history and heritage and therefore the importance of working in partnership with ethnic groups.

Re-defining pivotal concepts in relation to participation in heritage by ethnic communities, and embodying the transformed concepts in policies and strategies.

The nature of the tasks at hand

It is now the time for ethnic communities to reach, beyond fear, towards framing the reality of our belonging in the environment all around us, with pride, with confidence,

enveloped within the generosity of wishing to share what we have brought.

Heritage strikes at the heart of the validation of the historical relationship of the countries of origin of ethnic communities with Britain. It should confirm the legitimacy of our arrival as part of the web of Britishness across the globe. Heritage is the big picture against which everyone situates their personal reality. This paper is a call for ethnic communities to step into the big picture of heritage in order to complete it.

Action for change by heritage institutions

Things are changing but at the present time, special efforts still need to be made to enable ethnic groups to have the courage to undertake initiatives which make them more visible.

Government should, as part of their social inclusion policy, strategically enable the concrete expression of multi-cultural history and heritage. They should consider requiring key heritage institutions to undertake, as reparation, but also with joy at arriving at this point:

Initiatives which aim to uncover the currently invisible multi-cultural aspects of local and national history and heritage.

Initiatives which aim to encourage, support and assist ethnic communities in making connections with the multi-cultural aspects of local and national history and heritage.

Initiatives which aim to encourage, support and assist ethnic communities in the creation of new artefacts which embody and celebrate cultural memory, and multi-cultural history and heritage in the urban and rural environment at large.

Initiatives which enable the population at large to see themselves positively in the context of Britain's multi-cultural history and heritage.

Stimulating new thinking and supporting ethnic participation

Many apparently vulnerable ethnic groups are repositories of enormous strength, which can be switched on through frameworks of empowerment. There needs to be focused investment in the development of ethnic groups:

Invest resources to strengthen infrastructural ethnic minority organisations such as Black Environment Network (BEN) or the National Museum and Archives of Black History.

Key ethnic minority strategic organisations are small in number and scale. They are true survivors, with focused skills maximising the barest resources, set against years

of lack of support from funders, society, and government. These highly efficient organisations and networks are the main actors in the new commitment to ethnic participation in heritage.

They can enable ethnic groups to:

- Set their agenda and represent their issues, concerns and wishes
- Pool ideas and join together as partnerships to take forward initiatives
- Support each other as part of a network
- Create a forum for debate
- Form a movement working for ethnic inclusion

They can be funded to undertake initiatives aimed at new audience creation for multi-cultural history and heritage, employing Developmental Officers to reach out to support ethnic communities to access and make links with multi-cultural history and heritage, stimulate new thinking and engage them in the production of relevant resources for intellectual access to heritage

Funding schemes can use such organisations as delivery mechanisms to encourage and support projects focused on cultural memory, multi-cultural history and heritage to come forward from ethnic groups

Parallel to this there needs to be investment which aims to shift the vision of British history and heritage within the mainstream population. Mainstream infrastructural institutions - schools and universities, museums and other heritage organisations such as the National Trust should undertake to:

Highlight the multi-cultural nature of history and heritage in Britain within the mainstream population

- Identify and integrate multi-cultural aspects of history and heritage into all publicity and resource materials whenever relevant
- Express the ownership of history and heritage by everyone through the use of positive images of its multi-cultural audience in publicity and resource materials
- Organise special events and programmes of activities highlighting the multi-cultural nature of heritage in Britain

Strategically develop multi-cultural interpretation to enable intellectual access to cultural memory and multi-cultural history and heritage by everyone

See associated paper 'Multi-cultural Interpretation and Access to Heritage' by Judy Ling Wong re the concept of multi-cultural interpretation

- Research multi-cultural aspects of heritage sites and collections of artefacts
- Undertake the multi-cultural interpretation of sites and collections of artefacts

Undertake initiatives which enable physical access to multi-cultural heritage by everyone, and in particular by ethnic communities enabling them to catch up on lost time

- Undertake initiatives enabling physical access to multi-cultural heritage through the provision of transport, entry fees and programmes of activities for economically disadvantaged groups including ethnic groups
- Re-define significant catchment areas in the context of access strategy, according to the special significance which certain aspects of heritage sites or collections of artefacts may have for particular social or ethnic groups

Undertake initiatives and produce resource materials which enable intellectual access to multi-cultural heritage by everyone, and in particular by ethnic communities with regard to aspects with cultural relevance

- Undertake initiatives creating new socially and culturally relevant resources to enable intellectual access to multi-cultural heritage by traditionally excluded groups including ethnic groups
- Involve relevant ethnic communities in the creation of resources relating to cultural memory, multi-cultural history and heritage
- Recognise the importance of the local presence of affordable facsimiles and replicas of particular artefacts for various social, cultural or ethnic groups

Research, document and celebrate the cultural memory of ethnic communities and multi-cultural history and heritage associated with collections of artefacts, properties or localities

- Work in partnership with relevant ethnic groups to research cultural memory and multi-cultural history and heritage associated with particular properties or localities
- Create new artefacts in the built and natural environments of heritage properties to celebrate and mark the cultural memory of ethnic communities and multi-cultural heritage related to properties or localities.

It is not enough to look only to the past for landmarks and artefacts. For many excluded groups, the lack of these is in itself an expression of the denial of their role in heritage.

The powerful human urge to leave a mark or create meaningful artefacts in the landscape ranges from frivolous 'I was here' graffiti, to the gravity of war memorials 'Lest we forget'. (*Artefact - An object made by a human being - Concise Oxford Dictionary*).

It is a natural human need to confirm one's historical presence through the minutiae of concrete elements that form our urban or rural environment. The absence of artefacts celebrating the role of ethnic communities in the settings of history and heritage within which we should be cradled has left us without vital points of reference in the environment.

- Create innovative projects through the imaginative use of landscape, properties and artefacts enabling ethnic groups to make meaningful links to their cultural memory and heritage.

A local heritage initiative ?

At the present time, the Countryside Agency is promoting its new funding scheme for England - the Local Heritage Initiative.

Without some probing of the key concepts driving such an initiative, it can easily become a force for the reinforcement of a mythical purist and mono-cultural English history and heritage.

To move initiatives towards being a vital movement examining the scope of an inclusive heritage, they should be encouraged to ask the following questions:

What do we mean by 'local' ? Is this a spatial definition ? If so, what is the spatial limit of this concept ?

When does an ongoing foreign socio-cultural influence become local ?

How does someone qualify as a 'local' person in relation to heritage ?

Is it through how long one has been there ? Or is it through simply being physically present in a locality ? Is it through subscribing to the ways of a culturally dominant group ? Or is it through being a person who has obvious influence on the evolution of local heritage ?

Is heritage a fixed quantity or is it re-assessed and re-constructed for each period?

A progressive civilised society consciously takes responsibility to assess and refine its values. Each culturally dynamic generation transforms its heritage in order to take us into a better future.

For example, often, on the subject of ritualised hunting, the words 'tradition' and 'culture' are used as if anything from the past is unquestionably valuable. In particular, certain forms such as hunting with dogs has recently come under enormous pressure to be banned. While recognising hunting with dogs as having been

ÔtraditionalÕ for a long time, the manner in which it inflicts prolonged suffering and death is in contemporary terms no longer acceptable.

How do we value mythology that we no longer identify with ? Is there a case for the creation of new mythology ?

Is local heritage conceived as something which is embodied in concrete artefacts within a locality or the manipulated character of a landscape ? Or, on the contrary, is it the unmanipulated character of the landscape ? Is it considered as being also embodied in the living memory of local persons, including those who bring their heritage with them when they arrive ?

Should a local heritage initiative take its inspiration from existing artefacts or landscapes, or seek to identify and celebrate meaningful heritage that is invisible through the creation of new artefacts ?

Does the significance of heritage have anything to do with how old it is ?

Who decides what is significant and meaningful local heritage ?

Should a local heritage initiative involve everyone in a locality ?

Multi-cultural participation and the contemporary world

The acceptance of a multi-cultural British history as fact changes how all of us see ourselves here in Britain and within the world, re-positioning ethnic communities in the social history of contemporary society.

The inclusion of ethnic groups in a local heritage initiative inevitably brings it onto the world stage. The population at large will come into contact with the reality of people who are the continuity of world communities. It is part of the process of the healing of a society that can contribute to the re-positioning of inter-cultural relationships in the world.

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