

Ethnic Identity and Integration in Action

(Judy Ling Wong. Director Black Environment Network)

Ethnic Identity

Identity is made up of at least two major parts - how we see ourselves and how others see us. In the first part of our lives, how others see us defines who we are, until we grow in self-consciousness to see ourselves, to see alternatives and make choices. Then into the equation comes the struggle to be allowed to be ourselves as we would like to be.

For the first generation, one of the consequences of migration is the shock of suddenly being seen as unknown quantities. A framework, within which it seemed to ourselves that it was obvious to ourselves and to others who we are, has disappeared. Some central activities which define us can no longer take place - for example there may be no Hindu temple. One misses the warm crowded fun of traditional festivals which define the passing of time, such as the celebration of the arrival of the Chinese New Year. It is cold, and one has never known what winter clothes may be, having come from the coasts of Kenya. People stare as if one should not be here. The transportable aspects of culture are maintained with urgency, combining with varying individual memories into a mini-culture that is without the vitality of the culture of the mother country.

The culture of the mother country swerves and heaves like all cultures do, its components battling and evolving through the impact of different interpretations of contemporary concerns, and the shift brought about by every rising generation.

Ethnic communities struggle to maintain who they were when they arrived, freezing many aspects of cultural identity, which were formerly evolving within a mono-cultural melting pot. There are pro and cons to this. I have heard of the preservation of beautiful rituals of the Hindu wedding ceremony in the Caribbean, in a form which longer exists in India, and which are said to be like works of art. On the other hand, parents defining cultural identity in a restricted way may fail to convey to their children how they would have much more freedom culturally in their mother country, so that their children may feel oppressed by the apparent unchangingness of ethnic identity set within another major culture.

The first British -born generation

Children who are born here, born British, but who have parents whose country of origin is not Britain, face a very different scenario from that of a British child born into the majority culture. For every one of us, for the first four or five years of life, the family is the world. Going to nursery or to school is the first experience of culture shock. Much more so if English has never been spoken at home. These young ones wordlessly experience a version of the sense of isolation, disorientation and bewilderment that their parents encountered.

Children, phenomenal absorbers of new knowledge and experience, adaptable to all change under favourable circumstances, are now confronted with a bi-cultural setting for life. The struggle begins - how they are seen by their parents and the ethnic community, how the mainstream population sees or does not see them, the to-ing and fro-ing between the different cultural worlds of home and school. As self-consciousness emerges, the crisis of choice to be who one wishes to be marks their entire lives.

'Under favourable circumstances' - this is the crucial aspect in the equation.

The development of British ethnic identities

Cultures and their settings are inseparable. Although the ethnic cultures here have a relationship to the culture of their mother country, they are not the cultures of their mother country because the setting is Britain.

There are many issues here, linked but working within very different scenarios according to specific cultures and generational characteristics. Here I would like to restrict myself to sharing some insights gained through the work of Black Environment Network.

In the area within which BEN has focused its work, which is to enable ethnic community participation in the mainstream environmental movement, we have observed how contact between the mainstream population and ethnic communities create a new stage for the definition of ethnic identity.

Our work has two main strands. The first is to stimulate ethnic community participation in the environment. The second is to enable the mainly white personnel of the mainstream environmental organisations to work with awareness, and effectively with ethnic communities.

We have, through our work, observed that, significantly, for too many members of the mainstream population, there is no concrete image of persons from distinct ethnic communities because there has never been any contact. This terrible gap needs to be bridged, because within any organisation, who we include and how we go about our work is dependent upon what we know.

Distorted, piecemeal, sensationalised and extreme pieces of information, usually gleaned from mass media, hamper the ability of the most open project officer of goodwill to communicate comfortably with members of the ethnic communities. Much of our work is about enabling environmental personnel to meet ethnic groups without being riddled with a mythical fear, without being paralysed by the collective guilt of negative historical relationships, but to look forward to an encounter with confidence and interest and to relax into the discovery of accessible alternative human frames of reference. In other words, to enjoy what is in the main common ground, and to see differences, that is, 'who we are to ourselves' for the first time.

For many ethnic groups, the entry into environmental participation has been an experience which has allowed themselves to re-define themselves. They can choose to take up the powers of expression and assertion that comes with entering onto a wider stage.

Even on single countryside trips, we have had reports of how groups came to feel 'less isolated', and of having 'more possibilities in their lives'. There is an important sense of being allowed to claim ownership of this country in which they live and work. Groups from Sheffield have visited North Wales, groups from Bradford the islands of Scotland - the map of Britain becomes a reality.

Incidents take issues onto the agenda of mainstream personnel. Take the encounter of a white warden with a group of 13 year olds from the Vietnamese community who had left the streets of London for the first time. This group had never seen sheep before and their enjoyment of wildly chasing sheep will leave a big question-mark in his mind about the relationship of the urban population to the countryside for a long time. It may spur him into action, to realise that a nature reserve close enough for a day trip from London has a huge role to play in the lives of many people, and that the fact that where the reserve is situated happens to be where hardly any ethnic groups live is neither here nor there with respect to the possible programme of his outreach work. The presence of ethnic faces in the predominantly white countryside too confronts villagers and farmers with taking into account the reality of ethnic communities.

New forms of engagement

New forms of environmental projects have emerged, which make a contribution to the present urgent global/local theme of the environmental movement. The cultural garden, in which plants from different countries represent the presence of ethnic communities, has been replicated in many forms in schools and community centres throughout the UK.

Many inspiring cultural interpretations have emerged to re-awaken our emotions and enrich our relationship to nature and our enjoyment of experiencing nature. I cannot forget how a small group of Moslem Bengali women, who started a small allotment, said that what meant most to them as they worked is the fact that their feet are on soil, in contact with the earth.

Contact between the mainstream population and ethnic communities in the few examples given demonstrates how only contact can release the opportunity for the definition of ethnic identity to be fully activated within society. This full activation of the process of discovery by the mainstream population and the ethnic communities leads towards integration.

Who we are, as how we are seen and how we see ourselves, evolves, shows itself in particular forms at points in time, and evolves again, as all cultural identities do.

We can reach for diverse dynamic ethnic identities only through full participation in all aspects of British society. Within this participation, we and our children will clarify for ourselves who we wish to be because we and everyone else are in touch with the full range of choices. We look forward to this engagement.

ÒUnder favourable circumstancesÓ

I return to this crucial phrase because this is where the work needs to be done. Favourable circumstances for ethnic communities need to be created for us to engage with mainstream British life in order to arrive at being in charge of our future identities. Too many of our ethnic young people are lost. Too many define themselves in a situation of defence.

The freedom for ethnic communities to embrace what should be theirs does not exist. Every British ethnic person at this moment carries the damage of having no psychological freedom to choose to be who he or she wishes to be.

Some of the most basic elements needed are:

- natural mutual contact between ethnic communities and members of the majority culture
- access to the culture of our countries of origin
- equal opportunities for full participation in mainstream British life

Some ways forward

One fact from which we must draw enormous comfort and encouragement from is that the number of people of goodwill within the majority population far outnumbers those who reject us. There are many potential stages upon which we can nurture understanding and motivate action to build the multi-cultural society which we dream about.

We must be focused and create specific projects within particular circumstances. We must then continually build on this work and link up the impact of these avenues for social change.

I believe that professionals from the psychotherapeutic communities have a vital role to play in their deep contact with ethnic clients and their elaborate understanding of developmental needs.

Drawing on my areas of experience some possible projects which come to mind are:

1. The linking of vulnerable groups to providers of environmental activity and outdoor adventure, working with the first points of contact such as social workers, counsellors and GPs
2. Development of training packages to enable particular environmental and outdoor adventure project personnel to acquire skills to work with and devise activity programmes which support vulnerable groups
3. Identifying specific inter-cultural issues and issues concerning the development of ethnic children and young people, and combining it with the current theme of environment in order to work with:
 - playwrights and theatre directors to produce drama which tour schools and community centres.
 - writers with a view to create stories which appear in popular magazines and radio.

It is an enormous challenge and an exciting adventure to work across different fields and to engage with the community in the world. The theme of the next round of the National Lotteries Charities Board is 'Environment'. So if anyone is inspired to forge relevant socio-cultural-environment projects please contact Hilde and myself. We look forward to working with you.

Judy Ling Wong is the Director of Black Environment Network, which is established to promote equality of opportunity in the preservation, protection and development of the environment with respect to ethnic communities. She has worked extensively in the arts, in psychotherapy, and with various communities. Her continuing preoccupation is an integrated approach to environmental participation, bringing together different fields and cultural visions.