

The Arts Britain Ignores  
Chapter One: Introduction  
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If all the performances that took place among ethnic minority communities last year had been gathered together in one place, they would have kept a middle-sized theatre going for the entire year. 1975 saw two major West Indian street carnivals, processions for Chinese New Year in London, Manchester and Middlesbrough, runs for 14 West Indian and African plays, three Bengali plays and dance-dramas, about 12 mass-attended Urdu poetry evenings, a tour of a Greek Cypriot comic drama group, productions of three Gujarati plays, two Hindi ones and an Armenian production and copious performances of Bengali, Cypriot, Indian, Ukrainian, Polish, and Serbian folk song and dance groups. In addition a variety of music recitals as well as music and dance classes took place. These figures represent merely what has been turned up by this report. The likelihood is that they are too low.

The extent however to which these activities are known or even supported by the host community is minimal. Ethnic minority arts are an energetic but struggling sub-culture. On the whole they exist for the communities alone – necessarily, since little encouragement is given them to expand. The problems they face are those of neglect: lack of premises to rehearse, lack of comparable backup that is afforded to equivalent native British groups, lack of acceptance within the arts structure and lack of exposure. And although the level of activity is, as demonstrated, high, unless steps are taken it is likely to decline. Increased costs of travelling, transport, premises, costumes, cannot but sap the dedication of groups. Lack of outlets will mean that work is kept at a self-contained amateur level. It is likely to become repetitive and eventually irrelevant. In that way we will have killed off a vigorous growth that has every sign of being able to contribute significantly to the cultural life of society as a whole.

The literature on the so-called problems of immigration is vast – some of them genuine ones of mutual accommodation, many part of general inner-city difficulties: shortage of housing, educational facilities and general amenities. Whatever the category, immigrants and their offspring are presented, particularly in the media, at a disadvantage, offering at best a conundrum to be valiantly solved, at worst an incursion that will hopefully be ejected. In few instances are the advantages of immigration recognized.

Apart from direct economic advantages - in the health services and in various unpleasant jobs that the host community prefers not to do - the beneficial results of immigration can be seen at an immediate level in the streets of virtually any town in Britain. Food is an effective ambassador. Since the last war, Asian, Chinese and Cypriot restaurants have increased enormously. Moreover there are indications that what began as merely cheap food of variable quality is now being regarded with more

discrimination. Food columns in the newspapers and restaurant guides now make some attempt to understand different cooking methods and assess the products critically. A popular Chinese diners' club aims to educate English palates and thence to induce Chinese restaurateurs to strive for quality. Customers in Indo-Pakistani restaurants now have a reasonably clear idea of what they want to eat, rather than going timidly by the waiter's advice.

In the arts, a similar process of acceptance and discernment is yet to take place. Very few local authorities or regional arts associations have any informed knowledge of - or much interest in - ethnic arts in their areas. Indeed even following up replies from local community relations officers, it became increasingly clear how superficial their knowledge frequently was. Cultural activities seemed often to be viewed as a rather colourful local custom. Few CROs were aware of their potential, problems or even rights.

As far as local authorities were concerned, the most common reply to queries about support was that they made no separate provision for ethnic minorities (beyond the sum granted to the local community relations council): that they were considered as part of their provision for their people at large. This means, for instance, that youth clubs are funded and not either particular ethnic community youth clubs or activities in them attractive to certain minorities, that local authority sponsored entertainment is theoretically for a general common denominator.

The principle is, on the face of it, a worthy one. But looked at more closely it proves paradoxically to lead to effective discrimination. Communities have certain talents, tastes, traditions that need consideration for them to develop. The line of 'non-discrimination' means that they are ignored.

It has been claimed that attempts to foster ethnic minority arts are divisive: that they will lead to the perpetuation of differences that will disappear - leading to a happy, harmonious and homogenous society. That belief disregards three factors - firstly the demonstrated needs of new British. In the oldest immigration looked at - Poles and Ukrainians - it is striking how important their parents' own original culture still is to young people. It is a point of definition that in no way prevents them from identifying otherwise with society at large. For more recent newcomers, particularly coloured children, it is even more important to learn the positive aspects of what is commonly counted a disadvantage. Similarly this is a healthy lesson for the whole host community.

Secondly, Britain is by no means homogenous. In the past it has always grown through cultural accretions. In the present, modes of life, expressions and customs differ between classes and regions. Indeed, there seems currently to be a move away from the middle-class south of England stereotype of the 'Britisher', to more recognition of the character of particular regions (such as Scotland and Wales) on the one hand, and of individual communities (through the work of community artists and the Arts Council's involvement) on the other hand.

Thirdly, even if we were able to iron out differences, would we really wish to do so? The arts in Britain and internationally have always gained and developed through a creative response to new influences, from Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals to the use made by Picasso of African art. The difference today is that we have proponents of various arts within our midst; there is no need to travel. Not only could ethnic arts contribute to British arts, but they are also a possible source of enjoyment for all. Who would wish the splendid Notting Hill West Indian Carnival which gives delight to thousands eradicated?

Notting Hill is a major spectacle, a mass-attraction, that involves scores of musicians, dancers and street vendors and thousands of spectator-participants, and one that for a short time in the year turns an area into an exuberant copy of the Caribbean. Its virtue is that it not only revitalizes life, but that it also provides a bridge for the indigenous British. For a couple of days it is possible to participate in a 'jump-up', to share in an experience that is no common and everyday English thing, and – possibly - to catch some understanding of the enjoyments and values that gave rise to that form.

Many of the ethnic arts combine those multiple functions. They add variety and colour to the texture of life, as well as stretching knowledge and understanding. That extra dimension was for instance refreshingly demonstrated at the Commonwealth Institute recently where a number of school groups have contributed to the Third World thing theme. There were paintings, films, music groups, dance groups. The group of young dancers and musicians trained by Ghanaian Felix Cobbson, that very competently performed West African dances, had not an African (or West Indian) amongst them. The junior West Indian steel band absorbed white English children, as did the Indian dance group. A few weeks later at West Norwood library, a packed audience of both native British and Indian British watched a performance of a Tagore dance drama that included one non-Indian in the group. The presence of ethnic minorities afford the chance of not only seeing fresh cultural forms, but also of learning them. This is an opportunity, an aspect of a multiracial society that should be fostered and encouraged. The result would be a far more genuine meeting of races, based on respect for achievements and values.

If ethnic minority arts were supported for more positively, the question of perpetuating differences would in fact be lessened. Differences are only heightened, and arts made static, when communities are made to type in on themselves through rejection. At such a time preservation of a rather rigid past becomes important and the arts suffer. Funding and sponsoring the ethnic arts should have the opposite effect, if done sensitively. Although developments only come from a sure traditional base, the object should not be to preserve that alone. Since cultural expressions spring out of social conditions, they should change with conditions, otherwise merely the effect is preserved without the cause. For instance, several of our ethnic arts come from rural roots; they are village songs and dances celebrating harvest or rainfall and so on. When, however, farmers become Midlands charge-hands or even more important the

children of charge-hands (possibly accountants or teachers) the picture changes; the links to the situation behind the song become tenuous. Preserved culture has, like dried fruits, a certain limited attractiveness. As a sole and staple diet it leaves much to be desired.

Support for arts must lay stress on their development (which with greater exposure, is anyhow likely to take place) from the firm traditional base. There are indeed some signs that such a process is occasionally taking place - in contemporary Punjabi folk song, in Ukrainian music and Polish theatre. Theatre - and particularly among black British groups and playwrights - is where one would especially hope to find, since the language is common, different sensibilities trained on new situations. Indeed this is already occurring in the work of several good dramatists from Mustapha Matura to T-Bone Wilson.

Not all ethnic minority arts are the 'open arts' already described - the street carnivals, the steel band music and Indian dance. Polish, Greek and Bengali Theatre and Urdu poetry occasions are of necessity limited to those who speak the languages. This is no argument against subsidy.

Arts funding in general is designed to create events that offer entertainment and stimulation to the population at large, who itself subsidises it through rates and taxes. Poles, Cypriots, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are no exception. Although the arts of minorities can in many cases overleap racial boundaries the fact that they immediately contribute to the cultural life at large should not be the sole criticism for funding ethnic minority arts.

The less open arts also deserve encouragement. They deserve it firstly because they are valid, popular and important for a section of British people. This section frequently can draw little from the general arts activity financed by the Arts Council and local authority, because of language and social differences. (Nor are they alone in this. Many of the cultural activities supported by, say, the Arts Council - from opera to experimental music - are minority tastes, effectively inaccessible to large sections of the community). Secondly, there are strong arguments (particularly well-voiced in the Bullock Report 'Language for Life') for the retention of a mother language. The possession of a second language, it felt, gives second-generation British children an overall confidence as well as a feeling the language in general. We have also found that language and traditional literary forms can be used to make comments on a new society, hence helping people who are frequently put on the defensive come to terms with that society in their own way. Examples can particularly be found in the Indian section of this Report

Whatever the status of an art - whether it be a potential bridge or more limited to the sustenance of a smaller community - there is a case for more support than is currently given overall, by local authorities in particular. Minorities can be divided - for cultural purposes - into consumers and producers of arts. As consumers, their tastes merit consideration. An evening of Indian film music in a local library may in any case in

some areas be less of a minority taste than choral music. An evening of Bengali drama in Tower Hamlets has more relevance for a large section of that local population than olde style music hall.

As producers of arts, minority communities again help – help in finding suitable premises for dance groups, music groups, theatre groups and related classes. They also need some finance - fees for tutors to keep traditions alive, toward the cost of the often very elaborate costumes and musical instruments. They need moreover, to be used; to be given opportunities to show their work to new audiences.

Local authorities do occasionally act as sponsors to ethnic minority activities in the provision of facilities. Reading, for example, gave the town hall free for a five day Indian arts festival in June 1974. Preston reports that ‘several religious festivals have been granted permission to either parade through parts of the town or to use parts of the parks. A recent summertime Caribbean festival was granted permission to do both’. Several libraries departments (such as Bolton, Tameside, Rotherham, Bradford) now include material in Asian, East and Central European languages. The occasional authority such as Huddersfield and Birmingham, has hosted an East Comes West exhibition that provides examples of Asian artefacts with some explanation of the religious faiths from which they spring. Local authorities have also used the Urban Aid programme to create situations - by the establishment of ethnic minority community centres - in which the arts could develop. Provision of premises in this way is important, but what is also important is support for cultural activities within them, in terms of both funds and encouragement. This is what is lacking. Similarly developments within the education system, though welcome in themselves, need to be followed through, and related to opportunities for young people to continue the interests they have developed after they leave school.

Nevertheless what emerges from replies from local authorities is that hardly any ongoing activity that provides entertainment for a particular section of the community (such as Bengali theatre, Ukrainian choirs or Polish children’s theatre) is funded. Examples are few and far between. The London Borough of Camden does fund the theatre for Cypriots, Teatro Technis, but their £250 pa cannot be very effective, nor is it comparable to funding for another minority interest theatre in the borough, the Hampstead Theatre Club, which gets £14,000 pounds a year from Camden. The London Borough of Lambeth funded the black Dark and Light Theatre when it was still running, but again not as alternative civic theatre but as an amateur effort. Since the then director was trying to create a professional theatre with professional actors, he quickly ran into difficulties. All local authorities with a significant proportion of minorities were asked for details of support given to cultural activities. The total amount (from 75 replies out of 94) came to £4254 indirect grants the cultural groups or associations.

It must be, in all fairness, stressed that this amount does not cover hidden subsidy - for instance the use of school halls, the salaries of youth officers etc in largely ethnic clubs, the contribution toward a building that might eventually develop a program of

cultural activities funded under the Urban Aid programme. This £4000-odd pounds represents local authority grant-aid in 1974/1975 to ongoing cultural activities and organisations, such as the Notting Hill Carnival, Haringey's Cyprus week, Cardiff's Nigerian sculpture exhibition. It also represents only a fraction of what some local authorities spent on the arts within their boundaries. Tyne and Wear County Council, for example, will have given a probable £40,000 to amateur arts organisations in 1975/1976 (in addition to the £8000 for their folk festival) – ten times the amount given the previous year to both amateur and professional ethnic arts organisations by local authorities in toto.

Entertainment created by ethnic minorities for ethnic minorities are effectively unsubsidized. Ethnic arts are, in a sense, suffered; where they themselves push for facilities they can gain the free or subsidized use of halls, for instance, or permission to parade through a park. They might also be used in occasional festivals (though it is noticeable that Bedford for instance, who claimed to make no division in its inhabitants, had to go outside the town for ethnic minority performers for their multi racial festival). But ethnic minority cultural activities are demonstrably not on a par with other local activities where funding and support is concerned.

Like the Victorians, minorities tend to make their own entertainment. The level of participation in certain areas is enviably high. Derby, for instance, has among its 300 Ukrainians, two music groups, two folk dance groups and a male choir. It also possesses two Indian folk dance teams, Polish and Serbian dance groups, and a potential steel band. Classes for adults and children in all forms of ethnic minority music and dance are popular throughout the country with native British as well as new British. Again, the kind of support they receive is arbitrary often non-existent.

Frequently local authorities reported that they had had no applications from ethnic cultural groups, sometimes in areas like Tower Hamlets, where activities do exist. There is clearly a failure of communication here as well as of the initiative. To many native British, the workings of the town hall are arcane and mysterious. For new British they are doubly so - a fact that should be recognized and accommodated. Similarly regional arts associations have a low record of applications. (Many groups spoken to, indeed, did not know of their existence.) Only one regional arts association has a community arts officer. It is a post that could valuably be established by all of them.

The assets of the immigration - the acquisition of new cultural experiences, art forms and attitudes have so far been only minimally recognized and far less encouraged. If they were, Britain would gain a far richer cultural scene, and would moreover be giving minorities their due. Unless that happens there is no justification for calling Britain a multi cultural society.

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