

Who We Are

A re-assessment of cultural identity and social inclusion

Judy Ling Wong OBE

Who we all are

Who we are and what we can achieve depends on how we see ourselves against the enormous pressure of how others see us. Across the world, no community can feel this more than the Muslim community at present, subsequent to the events of September 11. But issues of social exclusion and cultural identity is not just for embattled minority groups. It is set within the urgency to move towards social cohesion as the basis for a democratic society, within which the work of social inclusion is only part. Threats to identity, among the supposedly 'secure' and dominant mainstream population, is also deeply felt. Indeed, it is the clarifying of what cultural identity means in our time, for everyone, that will allow the multiplicity of minority cultural identities.

The history of people is the story of their movement through the millennia, across continents. Groups disperse, fall into isolation under particular circumstances, meet, clash or join with others, constantly evolving their cultures through their impact on each other. In my vision of multiculturalism, the representation of cultural diversity is about interpreting the full range of achievements and potential of the one human race, with each unique culture at a point in time defined as unique combinations of multicultural elements. In practice, it is an exercise set in the integration of neglected histories and shared histories with the mono-cultural official histories of dominant cultures. This concept encompasses not only ethnic origin but all diverse cultural groups, each with distinct characteristics which we must understand if we are to engage with them successfully, including former mining communities, the rural poor or those who suffer prejudice because of their age, gender, disability or sexual orientation.

The scope of an inclusive heritage

Interpretation does not happen in a vacuum. It is set in the context of personal and organisational worldviews. The approach to interpretation sets boundaries for what we think and feel. To move interpretive initiatives towards examining the scope of an inclusive heritage, let us set ourselves in the most testing of settings, the local environment in which we live, and ask the following questions:

- What do we mean when we identify something as 'local' ? Is this a spatial definition ? If so, what is the spacial 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 ? Does it depend on 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?
- 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 ?
- Is what we present intellectually and physically accessible to all ?

Inclusive expression of history and heritage

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.

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 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

Heritage interpretation can work powerfully at many levels. Heritage interpretation which strikes at the heart of the historical relationships of the countries of the world can confirm the legitimacy of the presence of diverse minority cultural communities who are testament to a web of shared histories across the globe. Uniqueness and sameness will be seen to be in continuity with each other. It is part of the process of the healing of a society that can contribute to the re-positioning of intercultural relationships in the world. Or, heritage interpretation that recognises and explains little-known cultural practices of minority groups can bring comfort to individuals.

Key heritage institutions need to strategically raise awareness within their organisations and reposition themselves in order to:

- Move away from the domination of a mythical and exclusive mono-culture that is no longer relevant to the contemporary world
- Fill the gap that is the fact of Britain's multi-cultural history and heritage
- Recognise the essential involvement of diverse cultural communities in filling the gap that is multi-cultural history and heritage, and therefore the importance of working in partnership with representative community group and organisations
- Re-define pivotal concepts in relation to participation in heritage by diverse cultural communities, and embody the transformed concepts in policies and strategies.

The mono-cultural dominance of the official histories of many countries means that citizens whose cultures are neglected cannot begin to mould their presence and make their contribution towards an inclusive heritage. It is time for them to make their legitimate claim and situate themselves within the socio-cultural history and heritage of their countries in order to advance from the position of the normal social strength of being rooted in a common history and heritage into the future.

Action for change by heritage institutions

Things are changing but at the present time, special efforts still need to be made to enable minority cultural groups to have the courage to undertake initiatives which make them more visible. Many members of diverse cultural groups have not yet thought about the significance of inclusive history and heritage projects to their communities. There is a "forgetfulness" that is born of the despair of decades of exclusion and neglect. heritage institutions should undertake interpretative initiatives which:

- Uncover the currently invisible multi-cultural aspects of local and national history and heritage
- Encourage, support and assist diverse cultural communities in making connections with the multi-cultural aspects of local and national history and heritage
- Encourage, support and assist diverse cultural 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
- Enable the population at large to see themselves positively in the context of multi-cultural history and heritage
- Work in partnership with representative cultural community groups and organisations to enable

diverse cultural 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

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

- Highlight the multi-cultural nature of history and heritage 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
- Strategically develop multi-cultural interpretation to enable intellectual access to cultural memory and multi-cultural history and heritage by everyone
- 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
- 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 cultural groups
- Undertake initiatives and produce resource materials which enable intellectual access to multi-cultural heritage by everyone
- Undertake initiatives creating new socially and culturally relevant resources to enable intellectual access to multi-cultural heritage by traditionally excluded groups
- Involve relevant minority cultural 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 minority cultural 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 minority cultural 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 minority cultural communities and multi-cultural heritage related to properties or localities. The absence of artefacts celebrating the role of minority cultural 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 minority cultural groups to make meaningful links to their cultural memory and heritage.

The Future

We are all challenged by a combination of demography, self-interest, and the principles of equality and human rights to build local and global communities in which the strengths of all cultures join together in common enterprise. It is important to understand that working with excluded minority cultural groups is not about doing a favour of small groups of people. It is about working towards a vision of an equal and sustainable society of which we can all be proud and which underpins all our future.

The role of multicultural interpretation cannot be underestimated in advancing the cause of social inclusion. Its power lies in the he shaping of the big picture of heritage against which all of us see ourselves - the playing out of balance between who we are, how we are seen, and who we can be. It is hoped that the multicultural interpretation of heritage will be recognised and resources as a major project of these turbulent questioning times.

This paper by Judy Ling Wong OBE was first published in the Interpretation - Journal of the Association for Heritage Interpretation. Summer 2002. Volume 7. No. 2

Further reading

"Multi-cultural Interpretation and Access to Heritage" by Judy Ling Wong OBE.

The above paper, commissioned by the Heritage Lottery fund, and other resources are available on the BEN website. www.ben-network.org.uk