

MAAS & ETHNIC ARTS IN BRITAIN: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

I The Arts Britain Ignores, and the setting up of MAAS

When in 1976, the report commissioned jointly by the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Gulbenkian Foundation and the then Community Relations Commission was published the summary contained in the report envisaged an 'ideal situation'. The Arts Britain Ignores by Naseem Khan was based on two years of intensive research. This research was concerned largely with unearthing ethnic arts activities which were taking place, for the most part in isolation, without publicity or funding. The report outlined the diversity of the activities taking place within the different ethnic minority communities and the problems they faced. It ended with a summary and a table of recommendations which would ensure that ethnic minority arts survived and became capable of contributing to the cultural life of society as a whole.

MAAS was set up because the Advisory Group to the report felt that steps should be taken to ensure that the recommendations contained in the report were implemented. MAAS was set up in October 1978, after a series of regional meetings to discuss the implications of the report, as a "publicising, linking, advisory service". MAAS works on a number of levels. Firstly, we work with ethnic minority artists, groups and organizations offering advice and information on publicity, fundraising, touring etc., with a view to encouraging the development of ethnic arts. Secondly, we work with arts organizations to encourage an awareness of ethnic minority arts with a view to encouraging them to include ethnic arts in mainstream programming. We also aim to inform policy-makers of the needs and development of ethnic minority arts. Through these various channels MAAS hopes to ensure the implementation of the report's recommendations.

The Advisory Group envisaged MAAS as a short term project which would enable regional arts associations, local authorities and the arts network generally to assume full responsibility for the funding and the assessment and provision for ethnic minority arts. It was assumed that artists and groups from ethnic minorities would gain a thorough knowledge of the funding structure and administrative and organizational procedures. It also envisaged a number of regional groups operating on a local basis throughout the country on behalf of ethnic minority arts groups with the full support of the appropriate Regional arts associations and local authority. MAAS would then have a role in liaising with the regional groups and continuing the work of relaying information to and from people often through the pages of our monthly publication The Echo. The picture would ideally have been one of thriving support groups throughout the country with MAAS acting as a central point of reference and information.

Development of MAAS

Experience has shown that the original assumptions made in "The Arts Britain Ignores" were over-optimistic and erred on the side of under estimating the problem. To begin with, the report only touched the tip of the iceberg and brought to light mainly the more prominent and better established of ethnic minority arts. Further involvement of MAAS in the field brought to light more and more groups which needed assistance more urgently than perhaps the initial clients of the organisation.

MAAS generated a level of expectation among ethnic minority artists which could not possibly be met in terms of resources then existing. The original staff of two was swamped with requests for immediate aid. This continues to date.

The people who approach MAAS for help and information come from many different backgrounds - social, economic and political, and any assistance or advice given should be based on sound knowledge of the circumstances of each case. The process of providing useful assistance is sometimes a slow one, and necessarily so, but this can result in disappointment from groups who expect immediate solutions and improvement in their working conditions.

Clearly a great part of the MAAS workers' energy has to be expended on running the organisation itself, and such basic tasks as finding office space take a great deal of time. Funding is a continuous and major problem. Even with sympathetic funding agencies, the very mechanics of fundraising consume considerable effort. Funding bodies are often slow in transferring funds that have actually been allocated with the result that in an organisation like MAAS there is a nagging and constant cash flow problem which is unsettling for the workers who feel insecure in their jobs.

MAAS now has three full time workers and is appointing a second regional worker. There is a theoretical vacancy for another full time post, but no progress can be made on this until we are clear about income for 1980/81. We urgently need more full time help in the London office, and it would have been possible to make a appointment last year, except that we were constantly in overdraft due to the late arrival of grants. About one third of MAAS's total income for last year arrived after the second week of March 1980, a large proportion arriving after the end of the financial year. We are not able to have an overdraft larger than £2,000 at our bank, and interest rates have made a hole in our modest budget.

In common with many other arts organisations our need is for support by funding agencies to consolidate and continue work already undertaken. Unfortunately new projects and research are much easier to find support for.

Despite these handicaps, MAAS has achieved considerable success in helping ethnic arts groups and individuals to present their applications to funding agencies, and in advising and motivating artists in the field.

MAAS REGIONAL AND DEVELOPMENT WORK

Isolation is one of the major problems facing the ethnic artist and this is particularly true in the regions. MAAS has always been concerned with the interests of the regions. When The Arts Britain Ignores was published in 1976, a series of regional meetings were held to discuss the implications of the report. Since then MAAS has been closely involved with several regional initiatives. Our policy, to date, has been to encourage and assist the development of regional groups, similar in function to MAAS, working locally on behalf of ethnic minority artists. This was in order to stimulate self-help organizations which would be truly representative of local needs and wishes. It was accepted that these groups where they existed would work with MAAS but would choose either to affiliate to MAAS or to be formally independent.

MAAS' original staff of two was unable to work directly in the regions but it was felt that field-workers were needed all over the country. In 1978 MAAS appointed a Southern Co-ordinator Parminder Vir to conduct a six-month survey in the Southern Arts Association region on the arts of ethnic minorities. The survey was completed successfully and a report and register of artists were produced. The findings of this initial report convinced MAAS of the need for more regionally based workers. Funding was obtained from the Gulbenkian Foundation for the salary of one full-time worker for two years to cover the country. In view of the daunting task facing one worker, it was decided to split the grant into two one-year salaries and appointments were made in Dec. '78. Additional funding was obtained from Marks and Spencer for the West Midlands appointment.

MAAS West Midlands and Southern Regional Co-ordinator

Parminder Vir began work in February 1979. Midlands Arts Centre offered office space and facilities as a base for her work and this proved very useful. Parminder produced a report on her work in which she outlined developments in the vast area covered by her during her stay with MAAS. This involved identifying key people within the area active in ethnic minority arts and also encouraging the development of local groups such as the Asian Arts Group which was set up as a result of a one-day conference organized last year. A Register of ethnic arts groups for the West Midlands area and the Southern regions has been compiled. She has worked to gain ethnic minority representation on the relevant panels of the West Midlands Arts Association as well as assisting in the organization of several ethnic arts events in the area. Her work culminated in the appointment of an Ethnic Arts Officer in the Midlands Arts Centre, Christina Orford. Parminder began work in the East Midlands area shortly before she left MAAS to join the Commonwealth Institute and MAAS intend to re-appoint a Regional Co-ordinator in the East Midlands area shortly. This has been one of the most successful in terms of development work.

MAAS Northern Regional Co-ordinator

Jatinder Verma was appointed in January 1979. He was based in Bradford and he began by identifying key people in the Yorkshire region and organizing a meeting of ethnic artists and groups in the area with staff from the Yorkshire region. The meeting was the starting point for the Working Party on Ethnic Arts which now exists in Yorkshire. Jatinder worked closely with a number of groups in Bradford, Halifax, Leeds and Huddersfield. Unfortunately his commitment to the London group Tara Arts became pressing and he left MAAS to work full-time with Tara. His successor Tarlochan Gata-Aura was appointed to work in the Merseyside area in preparation for the forthcoming annual CORAA Conference in Liverpool. His brief was to establish contact with ethnic arts groups in the area and to compile a basic Register.

This appointment was less successful than the West Midlands one, because of the changes in staff and also the lack of a permanent base for the worker to operate from. MAAS has re-appointed a Northern Regional Co-ordinator Mohammed Naeem who is based in Halifax and will be attending the meeting in Birmingham.

CORAA Recommendations 1979

One of the most promising developments in 1979 arose from the Council of Regional Arts Associations Annual General Conference in Liverpool. One of the main themes of the conference was Ethnic Minorities' Arts. MAAS was invited to attend and present a paper on the first day of the conference along with DRUM. Norman Beaton represented MAAS. MAAS proposed a number of resolutions at the Plenary Session which were adopted by the Conference. They were as follows:-

That each Regional Arts Association:

1. Designate an officer with responsibility for ethnic minority arts and take steps to ensure effective co-ordination within and between their own officers and advisory panels on ethnic arts matters.
2. Identify people with expertise in ethnic arts in their regions and ensure that their expertise is represented on their advisory panels.
3. To give every possible support and encouragement to regional MASS officers.
4. To move towards the establishment of a touring network for ethnic arts events.

In addition, the full Council of CORAA asked its Executive Committee to arrange regular meetings between CORAA and MAAS and other ethnic minority group representatives to monitor developments, and to consider and report back to the Council upon the implementation of these proposals.

Development of regional MAAS groups and regional ethnic arts research projects
MAAS North West: This is a completely independent group with its own Management Committee. Its first Co-ordinator Vince Herbert was involved in broadcasting as well as MAAS NW, and he was not in regular touch with MAAS Central. His successor Pnina Werbner is, however, in constant touch with us and contributes reviews, information, etc. to The Echo. We participate in their meetings and attend their AGM. MAAS London relays information to MAAS NW about forth-

FUTURE PROGRAMME OF MAAS

The overall climate affecting ethnic minorities' arts has changed drastically over the last year. The future policies and programme of MAAS cannot be viewed in isolation from the shrinking opportunities available for ethnic minorities' artists work. 1979 was a crucial year. It saw many changes in the whole area of funding and many changes in MAAS as a result of new demands made on the organization. The coming year will be a critical one for the future of ethnic arts in Britain. Regional development has been uneven and work done in the regions needs to be consolidated. The relationship between regional MAAS type groups must be discussed. A great deal of hard work is necessary if the gains of the last four years are not to be eroded.

REGIONAL MEETING AND LIAISON

As announced at the MAAS Annual Conference '80 MAAS has felt the need for some time for a meeting of all those working in the interests of ethnic minorities' arts in the regions. The meeting would open channels of communication and enable us to co-ordinate our efforts more successfully. Hopefully we can pool our experience and discuss ways of moving forward.

TOURING CIRCUIT

Read MAAS is currently working on setting up a Touring Circuit for Ethnic Arts. This has been a long-term aim but in view of the shortage of funding it now seems a particular priority. At the moment there is no circuit into which groups and promoters can plug so touring opportunities are very uneven. A good network of venues and artists would increase performance and exhibition and workshop possibilities in the regions. We would also like to start a quarterly promoters bulletin to publicise details of resident artists and visiting artists who are interested in touring. So far the response has been quite good.

CORAA RECOMMENDATIONS

Work should be done over the year to ensure that the recommendations are being implemented in the various RAA's.

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

MAAS is currently up-dating the Register of Ethnic Artists and this will be published shortly. We are organizing a seminar on Fund-raising on December 6th and we hope that similar seminars could be organized in the regions. We hope to provide fact sheets and leaflets on topics such as publicity, organizing a tour etc. Overall our aim is to present advice and information in as accessible a way as possible.

EXPANSION OF ECHO

MAAS has found that this is one of our most successful areas of work. Echo circulation includes arts associations, theatres, community organizations and libraries as well as many interested individuals. It has a great potential for development. Over the next year we intend to:-

- i) Improve circulation and distribution of Echo through bookshops, arts and community centres etc. in London and the regions.
- ii) Improve coverage by liaising with regional MAAS type groups and regional ethnic arts groups more effectively.
- iii) Attract more contributors to Echo and improve the standard of writing.
- iv) Carry regular in-depth articles on pertinent issues and topics of interest.
- v) Produce regular special supplements such as the ones on classes and bookshops.
- vi) Actively canvas for advertising and also seek separate funding for Echo.
- vii) Make Echo a forum for discussion as well as an information source.

AFFILIATION

MAAS would invite groups such as MAAS (NW), CHROMA and SWEAT to affiliate to MAAS formally. Once a group was affiliated to us, we would not then affiliate to any other group in that geographical area. The main criteria for affiliation would be that the group is seeking to promote the interests of the arts of a diversity of ethnic minorities, that it is interested in a diversity of art forms, and that it is responsible to a broadly based committee. These are only the basic criteria, however, and further discussion is necessary on this. Affiliated organizations would have a right of representation on the Board of Directors and this would be reciprocal.

FORUM

Regular meetings to discuss regional ethnic arts development and funding should be organized by a committee composed of representatives from MAAS and affiliated organizations. The secretary of this committee could be from any one of the organizations and this post should rotate yearly. Research workers in ethnic arts, ethnic arts officers at arts centres should also be invited to these meetings. All staff and directors/management committee members would be able to attend these meetings of the affiliated organizations. The location of these meetings would be rotated according to maximum convenience.

coming tours of ethnic artists etc. This group has been closely associated with the North West Arts Association who provide the Co-ordinator's salary and a base, but little towards travel expenses, etc. This year Pnina is trying to raise funds to employ an assistant and to enable her to print a monthly calendar of events. She will assist MAAS Central in compiling a touring circuit for ethnic arts and monitoring developments in the North West.

MAAS South West

This group was set up in Bristol but to date has not had a salaried worker MAAS has been in touch with the group and in 1978 invited Errol Nelson of the group to join the MAAS Board of Directors but he resigned shortly afterwards due to the pressure of his commitments in Bristol. This group was involved in the recent report on the situation of ethnic arts in the South West by John Newman.

SW & SE Wales Arts Associations Research Project

These RAA's and the CRE have appointed an ethnic arts researcher for the SW England and SE Wales area John Newman. He has been in touch with MAAS Central and contributed information to the Echo etc. His report A Long Way to Travel is now available.

Yorkshire Arts Association Ethnic Arts Working Party

This has been set up as a result of the work done by the first MAAS Regional Northern Co-ordinator and will act as an Ethnic Arts Steering Committee for the Association.

CHROMA Nottingham

This group has emerged in the East Midlands and is at present seeking funding for a full-time worker in the area. MAAS is hoping to appoint a worker in the area as the Midlands Co-ordinator felt that there was a real need for more work to be done in the East Midlands.

SWEAT South Wales Ethnic Arts Team

This group is based in Cardiff and has recently been formally constituted. There has been little contact between MAAS and this group.

Scottish Arts Council Research Project

The Scottish Arts Council in association with the CRE have recently appointed a researcher into the arts of ethnic minorities in Scotland Frances Harding who is based in Edinburgh.