

Notes on a history ~~and strategy~~ of ethnic minority arts in Britain, and ~~strategy~~
various speculations on a strategy for the future.

1. There are several ways of looking at the history of ethnic minority arts in Britain. The first urgent question is what are they? The answer divides into several categories.

(a) The arts practised by members of ethnic minority groups.

Having said this, there is a need to define the concept further. ~~leaving aside the characteristics of European or American forms of art and popular culture (there is little point in describing an Indian playing Beethoven as an ethnic minority art, or a West Indian group playing~~ To begin with, an essential ingredient of ethnic minority art must be a form of cultural transformation. That is to say that the actual form which is being used, is in some way transformed and altered, so that a new perspective emerges, both in the form itself, and in the view of the world being transmitted.

It is therefore, for example, fairly pointless to claim that an Indian playing Beethoven is an ethnic minority artist. It may be true that the artist belongs to an ethnic minority, but it is also true that the nature of the form in which he works is such, that if he were to transform it in a way that took it outside of its own tradition, it would be fair to say that he was playing Beethoven badly.

It is not enough, therefore, for the artist to belong to an ethnic minority. It is also essential to any conceivable definition, that he or she is working in a form which allows them to enrich it by bringing in a different tradition, or altering the perspective from which the form is seen and experienced. The alternative is simply to reproduce another culture (in which case there would be little point in talking about it as ethnic minority art) or to distort its original intention (bad art).

Looked at in this way, it is clear that certain forms fall easily into the definition. E.g. Indian classical music or West Indian folk and popular music. European ~~music~~ classical music does not. There are obviously cases which straddle an uneasy borderline, such as that of the ethnic minority painter or sculptor, but it is probably safe to argue that wherever the form itself can be redefined ~~enriched~~ by experiences from outside its tradition, we are actually looking at ethnic minority art.

From this perspective the achievements of ethnic minority art in Britain are clear, but by no means large or obvious. On the other hand, it is these same achievements which offer us the most useful clue as to how and where we can proceed in future.

Digression on the historical use of ethnic minority arts concept.

It is important to understand the sense in which the history of ethnic minority arts has been influenced and distorted by political and social factors, ~~which were~~ ~~whose~~ whose natural dynamic was the exploitation of the notion, rather than an attempt to build a tradition.

Briefly, it is true to say that at the point where it was obvious that some form of artistic endeavour was inevitable as part of the lives of ethnic minorities in Britain, it was also obvious that it was possible to command money and resources on that basis. None of this was primarily done or set in motion by artists, but by administrators and by ideologues. This meant either that ethnic minority arts were recruited on the basis of the easiest and most favourable conditions for attracting funding, so that, for instance, the rationale for funding any kind of ethnic minority art was seen not in terms of its own excellence as forms of art, but in terms of its function to aspects of the society. E.g. ~~Some~~ Some groups have built an entire career ~~on~~ on featuring in "multi racial" festivals. Others have spent all their time as teachers' aides, more or less. Alternatively, the ethnic minority arts were ~~drawn~~ drawn into the service of radical political stances.

Only those forms which were obliged to survive in the real market place, (E.G. Reggae music or had built in requirements ^(i.e. a relevant audience) for moving towards excellence, e.g. some forms of theatre and dance, have actually produced a dynamic which includes the ~~cultivation of an audience which~~ altering of the ~~artist's~~ form and the audience's world view. And it may be true to say that the only useful and excellent forms have been those which cultivated their own audiences,

The dynamic being one in which the audience feeds off the product and reproduces energy which in its turn informs the artist.

Pass
A recent example of the most crass and (fairly stupid) way of exploiting ethnic minority arts has been the production of an all black Shakespeare at the National Theatre. Simply to use black actors and put them into a production which encapsulates a white director's view of blacks and of Shakespeare is mere exoticism. It fails a number of criteria. It does not reinterpret the form, merely distorts the original intention. (Blacks acting Englishmen do not become different. They are merely blacks acting Englishmen in the way that Englishmen would never do. This would only have meaning if the intention was to comment on the culture and world view of the English. This cannot be done if the production requires actors to perform as if the parts were actually written for blacks, which they were not.)

2. It does not bring the experience of blacks to the form, merely exploits it for the sake of "entertainment". Both blacks and Shakespeare suffer. If it were possible to have a director who could reinterpret Shakespeare, from a black point of view, it might work

Otherwise the idea demonstrated the political and social distortion which instead of taking blacks experience seriously offers it up as titillation. In a sense this is characteristic of the way that the society has used the concept of ethnic minority art.

Back group
What is needed is a redefinition and a process which seeks to redefine, by following the most dynamic currents in the arts blacks and Asians practise. The intention would be to alter the grammar of the language of art, so that the perspective from which people view these matters can come to include, as an integral element, the traditions and ~~acknowledgement~~ ^{view} of ethnic minorities. All tendencies can and should flourish within this change.