

Arts – What’s in a Word? Ethnic minorities & the Arts: Executive Summary

Background

This publication combines the results of desk research and a qualitative study commissioned by the Arts Council of England. The desk research involved collating statistics about ethnic minorities and conducting a literature review of previous research exploring inequalities in arts attendance and participation. The qualitative research sought to explore, amongst other things, definitions and perceptions of the arts, experiences of attending arts events, and factors limiting arts attendance. A total of thirteen group discussions were held among African, Caribbean, South Asian and Chinese people.

People may engage with the arts as attenders or participants/producers but the qualitative study focused primarily on attendance. The sample represented a range of levels of attendance at arts events; none were complete rejectors of the arts and at least half had attended at least one of a list of arts events in the last year. The more regular attenders tended to be well-educated, professional people and frequently had a history of arts attendance in their family. This report concentrates mostly on the less frequent attenders and those who attended rarely, if at all.

Key findings

Facts & figures

In 1991 just over three million people, 5.5% of Great Britain, were members of an ethnic minority group. Most were of South Asian or Caribbean origin and almost half were born in Britain. Greater London alone accounted for 44.6% of all ethnic minorities, but outside of London ethnic minorities account for at least one in five of the population in Leicester, Slough, Birmingham and Luton.

Forecasts suggest that the proportion of people from ethnic minorities is likely to grow by at least a fifth over 1991-2001 and it will probably continue to increase until the middle of the twenty-first century (Owen, 1996). The London Research Centre has calculated that if White minorities are included, more than one in three Londoners will be from an ethnic minority group in 2001 (Storkey, 1997).

The qualitative study

Definitions of the arts

The qualitative research found that the dominant images people had of the arts were opera, ballet, Shakespearean theatre, classical music and art in galleries (particularly abstract modern art). Many found this image off-putting and elitist, and assumed that such events were mainly for “posh” people, those over 35, and White people. For some, particularly older people and women, arts relating to their Caribbean, African, Asian or Chinese heritage were also uppermost in their thoughts when asked to define the arts. However, while such arts were central to *their* definition of the arts they did not always feel that the dominant definition in society included these activities.

The arts in Black, Asian and Chinese communities

People who were not interested in mainstream arts were nevertheless interested in arts related to their own cultural heritage (which they sometimes did not regard as “arts” first and foremost). Many who showed little or no interest in mainstream arts were very involved in Black, Asian and Chinese arts. There was a substantial amount of creative activity in the ethnic minority communities and a variety of activities were mentioned:

- Often arts activities were part of larger social, religious or cultural occasions such as festivals, religious occasions or weddings. At such events the dividing line between audience and performers was often blurred.
- Artists from abroad were popular, especially among Asian and Chinese audiences. People travelled considerable distances and paid the prices demanded to see these artists who ranged from classical musicians to folk artists and pop stars.
- Urdu and Gujarati dramas were popular with Pakistani and Indian people, especially older men. These were performed in mother tongue languages, often in community centres or town halls, sometimes with theatre companies from abroad. Caribbean comedy dramas, often performed in patois, were also mentioned.
- Plays derived from the experiences of Black and Asian people in Britain were popular, especially among young people. These drew upon the experience of migration and the differences between Britain and the Caribbean, or India.
- Young people *were also frequently involved in* described hip-hop, ragga, bhangra and other forms of music as being part of Black or Asian culture., *and saw this as part of British Black or Asian culture.*

Black, Asian and Chinese arts in its various forms provided a sense of cultural continuity, a link with “home”, history and the past. Within the context of a larger social event, the arts served to bring the community together across the generations. Many older respondents expressed a deep commitment to passing on their cultural heritage to their children and involvement in arts was a way of doing this. Arts events which people felt related to their own cultural heritage provided a sense of pride, ownership and belonging and seemed to access deeper emotions than mainstream arts.

Factors deterring arts attendance

Several factors appeared to limit attendance at (mainstream) arts and cultural institutions:

- *Lack of time and money:* these were commonly mentioned, however often people were motivated to make time and spend money on other sorts of events or leisure activities. Many admitted that even with more time and money they would be unlikely to attend mainstream arts events. People did not want to “waste” their money on something they would not enjoy and attending unfamiliar events involved an element of risk.
- *Availability/location:* this varied from area to area but seemed more of an issue for respondents in outer London than in cities such as Birmingham or Bradford.
- *Lack of information:* many did not know what arts events were available in their local areas and arts events were perceived to have relatively little publicity. Lowest awareness levels were found amongst people who socialised primarily within their ethnic community or spoke little or no English.
- *Language:* was a barrier for some, especially some of the older Chinese and Asian respondents who had little or no English. For them events in mother tongue languages often had a particular resonance.
- *Social barriers:* these were especially important for younger people and women. Not having friends or family who were interested in attending arts events could be an obstacle as could their disinterest or more active discouragement. Some Asian women went to arts events with all female groups of friends but nevertheless felt that their husbands’ lack of interest was an obstacle to their own attendance. For the Pakistani women in this study community disapproval was an issue.
- *Feeling out of place:* young people, those from working class backgrounds, and Black people in particular assumed that they would look and feel out of place in mainstream arts venues. In society more generally some respondents, particularly Black African and Caribbean men, had experienced racist exclusion. Publicity

materials generated by arts venues/organisations sometimes reinforced the view that ethnic minorities would not be found either among artists or audiences.

- *Lack of understanding*: many felt specialist knowledge was needed to “decode” and fully appreciate the arts.
- *Irrelevance*: Classical music, opera, ballet and much theatre, the perceived manifestations of “arts”, were assumed to have little to do with the lives of ordinary people and to be difficult to relate to.
- *The audience experience*: some felt the audience experience would be passive and unengaging; this was particularly the case with young people. Favoured leisure activities often involved an element of social interaction and participation.

In some cases, people’s experiences of mainstream arts events had confirmed their expectations, but there were also examples of positive experiences amongst those who were not regular attenders of such events.

Triggers and positive experiences

Publicity and recommendation/word of mouth played an important role in encouraging attendance. If something was recommended by a friend or relative who had seen it and enjoyed it, that could prompt people to try things out.

Groups of friends or colleagues who go to arts events could prompt people to try new activities. Often, one person would organise the event, get tickets and arrange transport and their friends would simply accompany them on the night.

Relevant themes and topics could trigger interest. For example, plays on themes of football, racism, or the lives of young people appealed to those who felt *that most arts* the arts were irrelevant to their lives. In addition, many of the positive arts experiences described by young people involved participation, such as playing instruments or inventing sketches.

Recommendations

Venues and arts organisations must consider their own particular circumstances and consult with local communities before developing a course of action. In addition the expectations of existing audiences must be balanced against desires of potential audiences. However a number of general recommendations are outlined below.

The research suggests the importance of the following in developing ethnic minority audiences for mainstream arts:

- *Shift the image of arts:* if arts organisations or venues wish to develop culturally diverse audiences their promotional materials must consistently reflect ethnic diversity. There are definitional issues around what the arts are seen to be; in most people's minds "the arts" encompassed a very limited range of activity and while some older people from ethnic minorities also included Black, Asian and Chinese arts they were not so sure that society would agree. The arts funding system itself should be taking a lead and promoting a broader definition of the arts and showing ethnic minority communities that it values a broad scope of arts activity.
- *Raise awareness of the arts using appropriate promotional methods:* in particular, word of mouth and personal recommendations should be encouraged. Organisations should seek to create a buzz about events and develop relationships with communities and influential individuals within targeted communities.
- *Creative programming and ticketing arrangements:* these might help remove some of the barriers to attendance. Asian communities, for example, tended to go out in larger family groups and therefore family discounts might be attractive, while some Pakistani women said that women only performances might relieve some of their community's concerns about going to arts events.
- *Develop understanding:* community outreach, workshops, the opportunity to meet the artists and backstage tours are example of activities that may encourage people to feel they are equipped to engage with particular art forms. More generally the education system itself plays an important role in developing skills and confidence and can turn people off the arts as well as on to them.
- *Create engagement:* for young people in particular, participation (i.e. creating plays, music or sketches etc) generated more enthusiasm than the prospect of sitting in an audience for a long period of time, therefore events which link-in participation may have more appeal. Many Black, Asian and Chinese people desired a product that engaged directly with their experiences and interests. In addition the unease people experienced may diminish if arts were placed in less traditional spaces such as community centres, temples and colleges.

As well as encouraging culturally diverse audiences to attend mainstream artforms, there are various ways in which venues and organisations might help develop culturally diverse arts.

- *Programming:* mainstream venues should consider longer runs for such Black, Asian and Chinese arts events, or more regular performances. Clearly, this relates

to the confidence and ability of mainstream arts venues to successfully promote these arts, and as previous research has indicated confidence in this is low.

- *Product development:* there is a demand for high quality arts events in large venues, and for these to take place more frequently than they currently do. This research indicates there is an audience for such events and a shortage of arts products to meet this demand. The funding system and mainstream arts organisations/venues should consider supporting the development of new work from Black, Asian and Chinese artists. Support could also be directed at local groups, theatre companies, musicians and other artists who regularly perform at community events within Black, Asian and Chinese communities.
- *Community partnerships:* many community organisations are actively involved in creating and promoting arts events relevant to their own communities, as part of festivals, religious celebrations, or other community events. Mainstream arts organisations could forge links with these bodies, find out more about what arts activities are taking place locally, help develop these activities and link their own programming to important events or dates in the communities.
- *Develop education and youth work:* many respondents were sending their children to special classes to learn art forms related to their own cultural backgrounds, such as music and dance. There may be ways of linking these activities into mainstream arts venues and organisations via provision of resources, performance space and educational expertise for example.
- *Assistance with organisation:* mainstream arts organisations and venues could also provide assistance with the organisation of Black, Asian and Chinese arts, for example helping with the administration involved in getting artists from abroad, hiring large venues, support with funding of such events and so on.