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## People's histories lost in the academy

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Grassroots ethnic minority groups are striving to tell the story of their communities, but the politics of heritage is making the task difficult, says Sara Wajid

Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka and Hanif Kureishi were the sexy sweeteners I needed to get me through the bitter pill of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. If it weren't for the optional postcolonial literature modules on the English literature BA at Sussex University, I would have signed up for something edgier-sounding, such as cultural studies, which had porn on the reading list. Even so, there were hardly any non-white students on the old-school "pure-subject" English literature BA back in 1991. These days, such modules are quite rightly ubiquitous, and about 40 per cent of students on the English literature BA at Brunel University, for example, are British Asian.

How short-sighted it seems then of Middlesex University to cancel its history degree and its unique optional modules on black history, which have been running successfully for the past ten years. Surely these are exactly the kinds of module that could help sell this pure subject to a new generation of students who are increasingly opting out of it. Hakim Adi, reader in the history of Africa and the African diaspora at Middlesex, who runs the modules, says: "Universities these days tend to work on the basis of what is profitable rather than redressing historic imbalances.

This history is very important at the moment in the heritage and (secondary) education sector; these courses could be instrumental in training teachers. It's extremely important this work be continued."

It is a story that will have a depressingly familiar ring to anyone working to develop black and minority ethnic history in the UK; the subject is a disaster zone. Institutions such as universities and museums are feeling the pressure through either market forces or the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to reflect the fast-changing demographic make-up of Britain - the forces from above and below say heritage must get blacker, and fast. In the main, this has resulted in a lot of reports, conferences, dull chatter and quite a bit of short-term lottery funding for shiny one-off black history projects.

There is no British Asian national museum or archive despite the countless community groups and collectives that have dared to dream of building one. Teachers, community historians, writers, curators and others who strive to record, preserve and spread the untold stories of minority ethnic communities are caught in a maelstrom of conflicting ideas about the role of heritage in promoting community cohesion and citizenship, the distaste for identity politics among their natural allies in the cultural industries and the panic about race and the lack of resources in the formal heritage sector.

This is why it was such a relief to read *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of "Race"*. This collection of essays, edited by Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo, a lecturer and former lecturer respectively in the cultural studies department at Middlesex, takes on the big questions, namely, how does a country's past become its "national heritage"? And whose history is counted as part of this heritage? As Carol Tulloch, lecturer in art history at the University of the Arts, writes in her essay about her experience working as a "black" curator in the current climate: "I soon realised that this was not a gentle world I had entered into, but a high-profiled programme driven by a social responsibility to ease the difference between 'black' and 'white'."

The range in the collection is dizzying: from the semiotics of flag-waving during the World Cup 2002; the decision by the Muslim Council of Britain not to take part in Holocaust Memorial Day; the relationship between Shirley Bassey, Ryan Giggs and Paul Robeson (you'll have to read it); museums as community spaces in Northern Ireland; and the co-opting of the black family history movement by white genealogists "dispossessing the dispossessed of their dispossession".

This collection reflects a mature and self-reflective sector rather than the headless chicken environment I'd been operating in over the past four years, as a former curator and fundraiser. Halfway through, I started to wonder whether I'm just a glass-half-empty kind of practitioner in a glass-half-full sector. In fact, art consultant

Naseem Khan's comment on the now famous "Whose heritage?" conference (from which Stuart Hall's inspiring and savvy keynote speech is reproduced in this collection) is equally true of *The Politics of Heritage*: "The panorama presented... was so dazzling as to make an observer feel all is right in the world. The thinking was profound, the vision was startling and its humanity was central. What more can be wanted? Unfortunately... the view from the ground is far less glittering."

Ansar Ahmed Ullah of the Shadinata Trust in East London would no doubt agree. The Shadinata Trust is embarking on its first official heritage project, Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain. The sophisticated intellectual and political framework speaks of long hours of discussion between the voluntary board and draws on deep wells of community knowledge and activism. The trust will collect and disseminate oral testimonies about explicitly political and highly sensitive issues: the 1971 War of Independence, the anti-racism struggles of the 1980s and the rise of the East End British Bengali music scene. These incredibly valuable histories will be recorded by third-generation Bengali youth living in Tower Hamlets. It's the wet dream of the "heritage-as-community-cohesion" lobby at the DCMS and the project will undoubtedly be celebrated, loudly and piously, with "colourful" photographs of the Asian "yoof" wearing those creepy white archive gloves in the Heritage Lottery Fund's annual report.

But the Shadinata Trust is a tiny voluntary sector community organisation. It has had to move offices three times in the first three months of the one-year project and has lost all the original project staff along the way. As Ullah explains: "We started this because nothing was being documented about our community and it's high time we started telling our stories. It's not rocket science, but no one else is doing it - this kind of work should have been done a long time ago by the council and funded by central government but there has been a real vacuum." Although a strategic partnership with the Centre for Research and Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism at Surrey University undoubtedly helped secure the £50,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund, it hasn't helped in the delivery of the ambitious project. Julie Begum, the project worker, says the passion within the community for telling "your own" story makes it feasible - just.

The charged, almost desperate, energy behind this project is familiar to me from my time at Salidaa, another tiny Asian-led voluntary sector heritage outfit, but it is strangely missing from *The Politics of Heritage*. Perhaps because of the bias admitted by Littler in the introduction: "In this book, 'heritage' is used in a relatively open sense... and will inevitably and inescapably reflect our own backgrounds in cultural studies and the encounters and biases that brings with it."

Littler and Naidoo do include the "unofficial community-heritage" sector in their definition but it is refracted through the eyes of professional curators or academics who are at one remove. Perhaps it is that cultural studies distaste for identity politics that is the energising force behind much of the exciting work at grassroots level, particularly relating to British Asian history. Although every essay in the collection pays homage to either Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities", Bhikhu Parekh's report on multi-ethnic Britain or to Stuart Hall's keynote speech, I could find no reference to the exciting burst of grass-roots work by and about Britain Asian micro-communities that has developed in the past three years.

Another glaring omission is the analysis of the influence of technology on the heritage sector generally and the unofficial community sector in particular. For instance, the UK Punjabi Heritage Association (three blokes and a computer) has created a free website holding all the Punjabi-related articles from the *Illustrated London News* by convincing a private collector to hand over his material and make it available to the Punjabi diaspora and wider public. How many cultural studies lecturers would it take to organise that?

Sara Wajid is former project director (development) of Salidaa (South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive [www.salidaa.org.uk](http://www.salidaa.org.uk)). *The Politics of Heritage* is published by Routledge, £17.99.

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