



## Carnival and the performance of heritage

### *Notting Hill Carnival: challenges*

The Notting Hill Carnival is an annual street event named after the area of West London where it takes place. This second film considers carnival today as a major heritage event with considerable economic benefits from tourism and for the identity of London as a cultural city.

The film and the two audio perspectives provide information and ideas relating to:

- the role of heritage in the Notting Hill Carnival
- Notting Hill Carnival as a tourist event
- the relationship between a high-profile and large-scale event and its grass-roots contributors.

There are three aspects of tourism which are of interest in heritage studies:

1. The economics of heritage, and its interaction with global, national and local economies.
2. The tourists themselves, and the ways in which they interact with heritage sites and the messages they take away with them. Heritage is an economically important sector of tourism, but the reasons why people want to spend their money on heritage are diverse and relate to the ways in which they make meaning of the world.
3. Why communities might wish to promote and control their own heritage tourism experiences.

If you haven't already done so, watch the film 'Notting Hill Carnival: challenges' and listen to the two academic perspectives now.

You might also find it useful to read this short extract from Chapter 6 of *Understanding heritage and memory* (Susie West (ed.), Manchester University Press, 2010).

### **Introduction**

Any endeavour to understand the practice of heritage will, sooner or later, need to puzzle out the relationship between heritage and the economy. But just as heritage varies from place to place, so too does the economy, and that geographical variation makes the relationship difficult to summarise. Some like to point out how economic conditions and profitable topics shape the practice of heritage – how they influence which particular heritage (there are always others) gets written up and advertised in a locale, for instance. Others argue the reverse, that interpretations of heritage shape the economy in significant ways. This is true for cities like Stratford-upon-Avon, which was the early home of Shakespeare and which now has an unusually prominent theatre sector. So interpretations of heritage influence the economy, just as the economy offers opportunities and constraints for the practice of heritage. We can understand this as a reflexive relationship, a quality found in many other heritage activities discussed in this book.

### **Economic development, tourism and heritage**

Tourism is also a substantial industry. When measured in terms of gross national product (GNP), tourism is thought to account for about 12 per cent of all global economic activity. Its suffusion, intensity and reach give tourism immense power in shaping popular perceptions about places around the world. That means the economy – in the form of interest from the 'right' (or most profitable?) kinds of tourists – may substantially affect which histories, and which interpretations, of a particular site become the official canon of its heritage.

Conversely, consider the World Heritage site designation. That status often serves to brand a site as a top international attraction, which leads many to believe the site's heritage will drive local economic development. For instance, soon after China's Lijiang Ancient Town was named a World Heritage site in 1997 the local government started to promote tourism development. In their enthusiasm for potential prosperity, some residents recommended that local religious artefacts be turned into tourist souvenirs. Outside entrepreneurs converted residential homes along the main street in Lijiang's Ancient Town into stores. Within five years there were 877 souvenir shops and service outlets along that central street. Expectations of economic gain also seem to have been met. By 2005 the expenditure of international tourists in the city amounted to almost \$US 50 million per year. That was five times the expenditure before the area was awarded its World Heritage site status.

However, Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge (2000) suggest that the effectiveness of heritage as an instrument for economic development is often exaggerated. In many cases, local financial resources and entrepreneurial skills are insufficient to revitalise business around a heritage site, leading to more ownership by outside investors and to the immigration of entrepreneurs. Communities often witness the outsourcing of heritage expertise, transnational arrangements for marketing and sales, and the influx of labour for new service-related jobs in the area. Even UNESCO's World Heritage programme suggests caution about the economic benefits of heritage tourism. Its consultant (Pederson, 2002) points to widespread economic leakages, since most of the money tourists spend – on airfares, hotels and booking agents – benefits large foreign companies. Developers and local elites also tend to monopolise the smaller-scale components such as tour-guide operations and area transport services. And tourism often adds to burdens on some segments of the community without producing many benefits for them. These effects can start to snowball once it appears that profits can be made from additional demands for what is, otherwise, considered just a free (or public) attraction: local heritage.

## References

Graham, B., Ashworth, G.J. and Tunbridge, J.E. (2000) *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy*, London, Arnold.

Pederson, A. (2002) *Managing Tourism at World Heritage Sites*, World Heritage Series #1, Paris, UNESCO.

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So what do you think about the following questions:

- In what ways could the Notting Hill Carnival be understood to be a form of heritage?
  - Do you think its role as a heritage 'practice' has been diluted by its growth in size and the need to attract external funding and produce an income? If so, in what ways?
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## Feedback

Today's Notting Hill Carnival is a massive event, in both scale and economy and yet it manages to remain independent of institutional control. Although there are questions about the best way to develop the carnival further (even to whether it should move out of Notting Hill), there appears to be agreement that success has not diluted the carnival's power to represent black identities, now as part of a more diverse urban society. Perhaps the limited role of corporate sponsorship and official grant-giving currently ensures that conditions of participation and content remain clearly under the control of the carnival board and the bands. This is now a major tourist event, created in this case by a displaced community, and it remains under the control of the black community in London. It appears to retain cultural credibility with performers and spectators as a result. However, as an event that has passed down generations of participants, it is also open to change. Change in scale is highly visible, but more importantly the carnival has effected change as it is credited with successfully challenging racism on London streets and with promoting inter-cultural (and now multi-cultural) dialogue. These are positive social, cultural and political benefits which follow on from regaining or retaining control of heritage.