



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Challenges perspective: Hakim Adi

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I think that people have very different views on carnival. I think it will depend certainly where people stand on some of the big issues, you know, should carnival become more commercial, should it be sponsored, should it be a people's carnival, should it be on the street, should it be in the park, does it have very significant political meanings, is it mainly a cultural festival? People will disagree about these things, well not necessarily disagree but have slightly differing views, again depending on when they became closely involved with the carnival, how many times they've been to the carnival, whether they are key players or see themselves as key players, and some may believe that they have the authoritative view on what carnival is and how carnival should develop, and so on.

But I think just as important are the views of those who go along every year, or every few years, or who used to go along, who also have their opinions, as well as those who are involved in the mass camps, are involved in carnival as participants. I think the first year I went was probably '77, I think I was supposed to be or I would have gone in '76 but I can't quite remember why I didn't go in '76. '76 was, of course, the big police attack on carnival, so carnival in '76 I think for myself and some of my friends what happened then was something which was to be not necessarily celebrated as such, but certainly you know an act of rebellion and resistance against police and the State authorities, and so on, and was seen as being, you know, entirely legitimate.

And so carnival had a significance in those days, not just as a cultural festival and a time when people got together and a time for, you know, music and dance and food, and so on, but also for that feeling of solidarity, that act of solidarity, if you like, tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of black, mainly black people getting together, reclaiming the streets, playing music, dancing, and also being in a position in terms of numbers and so on if the police attacked then they'd be resisted because the 1970's, I guess in particular, was a time of, I guess, state and government/police repression as far as the black communities were concerned, particularly as far as young people and youth were concerned. The position of the communities, the status of the communities, and the status of individuals within those communities has definitely changed and I think to some extent that's reflected in Notting Hill Carnival itself, how it's presented, how it's portrayed, how it's sponsored, how it's recognised by the establishment, the Government, and so on.

I think what one concludes is that carnival has become an extremely important, an extremely significant festival of cultural events for many tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people over, you know, the last fifty years so it's become seen as a kind of national institution now, whereas thirty years ago or forty years ago it wasn't seen in the same way. It was certainly much more of a Caribbean or a black festival which had a particular meaning for the black communities in London and to some extent in other parts of the country. But now it's been officially recognised as Europe's biggest street festival, and so it's taken on a sort of grandeur that it perhaps didn't have, and perhaps some people wish, still wish it didn't have, and it's sponsored, well in 1958 it wouldn't have been sponsored, or the 1960's, and now it's sponsored and one can speculate on why it's sponsored, and whether it's a good thing that it's sponsored and so on, but it is, it has more official recognition, politician, leading politicians come and want to be photographed at it and so on – that wouldn't have happened in the 1970's or 1960's necessarily. So it also reflects a requirement of, you know, the political establishment to be seen to be recognising this cultural festival, to be seen to be recognising the contributions of people of Caribbean and other minority origins, and so on, so the way

carnival is now does reflect the changes that have taken place in Britain over the fifty years in which carnival itself has played some role.