



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Multiculturalism perspective: Hakim Adi

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Hundreds of thousands of people get together every August Bank Holiday to celebrate their cultures, or to meet together to affirm themselves simply by gathering together in one place, I think was very, very important for, if you like, the sort of affirmation of black communities in London and further afield because, you know, apart from meeting in clubs or in homes or in churches, or wherever it might be, you know this was a mass mobilisation of those communities and that in itself is very, very important, just that the gathering together, you know, the seeing people, the meeting of friends, the meeting of people from outside of town, the taking over the streets, that that in itself is a very empowering activity. You may never go anywhere near a steel band or you know you may not play a mas but just being there I think is empowering to people. Of course as a big cultural festival the fact that then other people wish to come to it and recognise it has undoubtedly played a role in, if you like, changing the perceptions, changing the status of black communities in Britain. It's not the only thing, I wouldn't necessarily say it's necessarily even the major thing, but it's certainly one aspect of how the status, the position of black people in this country has changed over fifty years. It's obviously not the same now as it was in the 1950's.

I think if we look at the Notting Hill Carnival chronologically it was a creation of what people called the first generation, I mean actually they weren't the first generation, but certainly the first post-war generation of migrants who came to Britain from the Caribbean en masse, as it were. It comes out of that period and those struggles, but there were other struggles and those struggles are, for example, the struggles that were waged on the streets in '58, in '76, and in many other occasions. The status of people has changed, people have refused to accept second class citizenship, they've moved forward educationally, in terms of employment, and so on and so forth, so carnival obviously plays its role in that, but it's only one of many, many types of change which have taken place during that period. You can say to some extent what black people lacked in the 1970's or even 1980's. In some ways it's different from what people lack or what problems there are today. I mean in the 1970's, for example, you wouldn't even see black presenters on television, for example or you know, black politicians or you know there was no, or very little recognition, even that kind of equality existed or that recognition of people's worth existed in the media and so on, so today to some extent that's changed.

What carnival may have done for me, or what it's, what it meant to me in the seventies, it's not going to mean the same to me now because I've changed, but also the world's changed, but probably for other people who go to it today what they require, what they need and what they feel that society is not offering them is probably different, and they may feel just as aggrieved or just as alienated, but carnival may not play exactly that same role as it did, as I say, for me as an individual, and probably many of my friends in the seventies. So the world has changed and carnival has, you know, has changed with it.