

Consultation and Workshop Report

What Matters? A conversation exploring the challenges and opportunities in creating and preserving British Muslim heritage.

The following report is a summary of key findings from a consultation and workshop organised by the Everyday Muslim Project. The event, held in London on the 26th March 2016, was attended by approximately 40 participants from the heritage, arts, media and education sectors.

The objective of this consultation and workshop was to identify and provide possible solutions and measures to the specific challenges, needs and opportunities related to British Muslim heritage with the aim of creating a cohesive manifesto as a reference for those interested in ensuring that British Muslim heritage is included in wider British heritage. A series of discussion topics ('provocations') introduced by different speakers provided a context for the group debates that followed.

Provocation 1: Who are British Muslims?

In the first 'provocation', spoken word artist and one half of the British Muslim hip hop duo 'Poetic Pilgrimage' Tanya Muneera Williams focused primarily on the conceptual notions of the individuals and communities that make up the label 'British Muslims'. She noted the diversity of British Muslims and the need to acknowledge this diversity when collecting histories.

- The subsequent discussions agreed that it was imperative that the differing experiences and communities be included in the wider narrative.
- It was noted that there was a tendency within academia, policy work and on a political level to have a myopic view of what constitutes the label 'British Muslims' often conflating the diverse community with the Muslim South Asian communities.

- The majority of participants agreed that acknowledging the diversity of the communities that make up British Muslims (be that the differing sects found within Islam, the array of cultural traditions that inform the practice of Islam in Britain etc.) enriches not only the histories collected but have a practical present day influence on how Muslims are represented in society.
- Several participants cautioned against the tendency for community projects and initiatives carried out by institutions to pander to stereotypical depictions and “overdone” narratives when embarking on endeavours to do with the Muslim community in general. There was a call to move away from these discourses and to introduce a different and unknown side to the Muslim community and its heritage.

Provocation 2: Why do we need partners?

Carien Kremer, a curator at Vestry House Museum and the William Morris Gallery, discussed the need for partners and the importance of collaboration in ensuring that museum and archive spaces include British Muslim heritage.

- In the ensuing discussion it was agreed that partners were important particularly with regards to the advantages of having different perspectives, resources and expertise.
- Collaboration was seen as a positive method in pursuing projects and considered crucial for their success especially with regards to the depositing of information gathered in the duration of a project and obtaining participants and engaging with the communities concerned.

- The issue of constraints imposed by funders/certain partners was identified as an issue that at times inhibits the growth of certain narratives that a given community wants to project. This was also identified as a problem with regards to building trust amongst the communities in question which often takes time.
- Following on from the previous point it was highlighted that institutions/museums etc. partnered with community projects need to listen to minority communities and allow them to put forward their own stories and narratives and include what they feel represents them as opposed to institutions imposing or steering these narratives.

Provocation 3: Why teach British Muslim heritage in the classroom?

Martin Spafford, co-author of the OCR Migration unit in the UK history curriculum and retired history teacher, discussed the importance of school curriculums reflecting diversity and the need to embrace British Muslim history as part of general British historical narratives.

- While there was acknowledgement that the curriculum does incorporate the histories of ancient civilisations and non-European societies it was noted that there is very limited incorporation of the racial, ethnic and religious diversity within Britain itself from a historical perspective.
- One issue raised was that of the extent to which teachers are knowledgeable enough, willing and able to teach not only the available modules that include diversity but other educational material from external sources that can be incorporated into the curriculum.
- It was noted that teachers who are eager to incorporate diversity into the curriculum may not have the support from schools, nor the time and resources. Indeed it was pointed out by several teachers that educational

standards force them to meet milestones and thus topics deemed as even slightly outside of the curriculum are discarded.

- It was also noted that while the focus on local history can provide a platform from which diversity can be introduced there is a danger of BME communities being positioned within the narrative of social change and thus portrayed as outsiders, perpetuating the notion of Britain as a historically homogenous nation.
- There was unanimous agreement that a change in attitude towards British history is needed and that it was imperative for what is often classified as 'minority histories' to be drawn into wider British history. There was also agreement that these histories have to become an intrinsic and standard part of the taught curriculum.
- It was noted that Muslim heritage does not need to be limited to the history curriculum but also be integrated into subjects such as drama, art, English etc.

Provocation 4: How are Muslims and Muslim heritage portrayed in the media?

Tharik Hussain, a Media Studies teacher, journalist and broadcaster drew on his own personal experience producing a radio show for the BBC to highlight the adverse effects of the media's negative representations of Muslims.

- In the discussions that followed it was suggested that the real challenge and problem is that truthful positive stories do exist but due to the political climate people are hesitant to be reported on regardless of their stories.

- There was agreement that there is a great responsibility to create a counter narrative in the media. Opinions varied on the way to realise this, with some participants noting the restrictive and narrow nature of the media while others argued that the responsibility lies within the Muslim communities and in particular the British Muslim establishment (i.e, imams, mosque boards, organisations purporting to represent the British Muslim communities).
- Niche media (such as channels catering to British Muslim audiences) were deemed by some participants as potential platforms from which to inform the communities of their own heritage and Muslim presence in Britain. However others believed that their impact would be limited given the quality and trajectory of their programmes. Others believed such channels have limited impact both on the Muslim communities in Britain and on wider society.
- It was noted that although historical programmes on Islamic heritage are aired on television the focus is often on this heritage outside of Britain and Europe (apart from Islamic Spain). Instead the notion of any Islamic history/heritage is often portrayed as 'foreign' and as coming from regions such as the Middle East and South Asia. This was also a point brought up in discussing existing niche media.

Provocation 5: Where should British Muslim heritage live?

In the concluding 'provocation' heritage professional Halima Khanom posed the question of where and how British Muslim heritage should be collected and preserved.

- Here again the issue of the diversity of British Muslim communities was debated. It was suggested that any endeavour that was assuming the role of creating a centre for British Muslim heritage would have to include all

the communities, including their cultural influences, customs and traditions as this has a bearing on their identities and practice of Islam.

- Several participants argued strongly for British Muslim heritage to be present alongside other British heritage in national institutions, museums and galleries, acknowledging that the present representation of British Muslim heritage amongst such institutions was very limited at best.
- There was an interesting debate on whether the future of British Muslim heritage should be an online endeavour as opposed to a physical museum. Opinions were divided with some believing that due to funding cuts and financial difficulties an online 'museum' or archive would not only be more practical but be more inclusive and allow for greater access. Furthermore it was argued that virtual museums are becoming more prevalent and offer opportunities of curating exhibits which in reality would not be feasible.
- Others however argued for a physical space in the form of a designated institution charting the history of Muslim presence in Britain. It was argued that virtual museums lack the immersive experience and impact that a physical space with objects can create.
- Several participants advocated for both a virtual, online space alongside a physical museum/archive, espousing the benefits of both endeavours.