

Do We Need Black History Month?

What is not generally known in England is that Black History Month originated in America in 1926 as *Negro History Week*. The month of February was selected in deference to Frederick Douglass, the great Black American abolitionist, statesman and reformer of the 19th century, and Abraham Lincoln who were both born in that month.

Black History Month was adopted in London in October 1987 as part of African Jubilee year. The decision to make this an annual event each October was endorsed by the Association of London Authorities. From its early beginnings in America, Negro History Week is now Black History Month. But what does the word 'Black' really mean today? Not so long ago it denoted a collection of communities of various origins who came to be known as 'Black' following increased immigration after the war. "Black" used to be a useful political stance - a point of resistance- in the face of overt racism and oppression in the late 60s and early 70s and since then the contributions made to Britain by migrant communities have been many. These days 'Black' seems to be divorced from 'Asian' as a term, so in the context of this paper I am referring to people of African descent who are now British.

From *Week* we have moved to *Month*. But today any calendar month of the year would be appropriate for celebrating Black history. Throughout our recent history there have been many Black heroes - from Equiano and Toussaint L'Overture to W.E.B.DuBois, Cheikh Anta Diop, George Padmore, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Euzhan Palcy [film maker], Malcolm X, Mary Seacole, Rosa Parks, Claudia Jones etc.etc. An unending list of revolutionaries to world leaders, activists, writers [Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo], scholars [J.J. Thomas, Adu Boahen, J.C.deGraft Johnson, Ivan Van Sertima ...] and scientists*; as well as the far reaching impact of Black music [jazz- Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Quincey Jones, Herbie Hancock], entertainers, sportsmen [Mohamed Ali, Viv Richards, Brian Lara, Pele, Tiger Woods] professionals and workers on world culture.

Black history month, it seems to me, has come to reflect only the second-class status of black people within British society. A mere distraction or act of appeasement, it minimises Black history and achievements, ignoring the true historical perspective of the contribution of Black people. White children as well as Black [who still experience racism] should learn that our histories are inextricably part of all of our histories, so changing the way they perceive themselves and the world. Black history in Britain dates back to the presence of African troops in the Roman armies. There was also a significant Black presence in England even before the days of European conquest of Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean, and slavery and the heinous crimes perpetuated by Europeans. Black history also dates back to the civil rights movement of the

1960's and the ongoing struggle against racial discrimination. This reality can only be transmuted by unearthing the darkness of the human psyche in the context of colour: being Black and trapped in a White culture; being White and caught in an ambush of denial – the chequered history from which we must learn. [see my book *Blackness & the Dreaming Soul*, Shoving Leopard, 2007]

For Black people it would mean rediscovering the knowledge of who they really are, thus making themselves able to contribute positively to the healing of society. Their mere presence here is already making Europe confront its racism. Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela have shown that they can influence and change entrenched attitudes. Mandela was once considered a terrorist. My particular hero has been Aimé Césaire, the great revolutionary politician, poet/philosopher from Martinique who died only recently. His revolt against Europe is what worked on me in a subliminal yet positive way. It wasn't just a revolt against racism, colonialism and the excesses of European culture but a call for a return to our native human values, to recognise that Nature is alive and bounteous and that we should not abuse her.

In the English speaking world black people are generally unaware of the contribution of Césaire. Frantz Fanon, author of *The Wretched of the Earth* – the bible of the Black power movement in '60s America- acknowledges Césaire as his mentor. This movement knew about '*Black is Beautiful*', but alas only on a superficial level. Césaire's plea was for a reconnection with Nature and a call for the emergence of a new man with new values. The Black press in Britain, I am told, did not even carry an obituary of the great man. In my essay *The Way of the West* I said that the Black man having reclaimed his authentic history and recovered his lost soul, must not fall into the trap of aspiring to assimilate into the so-called civilized values of his former oppressors. On the contrary, he must revert to his traditional values of community and caring; celebrating the intrinsic goodness of African life and rites of passage; the 'being' mode as opposed to the 'having' of Western culture, encapsulated in the concept of Modimo, where all life is sacred.

Surely it is time to challenge the Eurocentric nature of historiography, which still ignores its debt to the great civilisations of the world - India, China, Sumeria, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Egypt is of course an African country and all our knowledge of mathematics and philosophy originated in Africa where Pythagoras, the father of Greek civilization, (from which we trace our cultural and philosophical heritage knowledge) studied in the temples for 21 years. I have suggested elsewhere that Black people themselves have forgotten their birthright; that Africa was also the birthplace of the human race [the Mitochondrial Eve] where human history began. People of the African diaspora suffered tremendously from colonisation of the mind. They are still unable to disentangle themselves from the identity of 'collective victim', rooted in the experience of colonialism and memory bank of slavery, which falsely gives them a sense of solidarity - a position that engenders further rejection, one which I call the 'black trap'. [The Way of the West, Scientific & Medical Review]

Pride in one's blackness is just a part of a negative definition of self and needing to state that one is black and proud would be like trying to defend the obvious. This kind of pride is the other side of the coin of colonialism, the hubris of white institutions being the other.

What I am proposing is that funds should be allocated all year round instead of for just one month in the calendar year for a proper acknowledgement of our one history – to teach the history of Empire, not just cultural events. I suggest that a more detailed exposition of activities and learning should be promoted in a year-round approach to Black history, not just by local authorities but also in the media.

Spending could be at the discretion of local authorities and educational bodies. They could arrange well structured events in conjunction with other bodies to ensure that there are no clashes of timetable and that a potential audience can witness them all rather than having to choose because of a concentration into a single month. Indeed, the greatest disadvantage of allocating just one month to all things black is that too many events are crowded into a short space of time. Also, some organisers of events will not care about the quality of events to be presented and so a lot of money is spent indiscriminately and planning and advertising can be slipshod.

A good example of what has been achieved by persistent lobbying over many years by the Equiano Society among others, is that now the story of Equiano will be compulsorily taught at KS2 (aged 11-14) in all British schools from September 2008 - not only during the month of October. But perhaps what is most urgently needed is in-service training for teachers, many of whom may still treat teaching about Equiano as a one-off exercise in *exoticism*. The whole issue of slavery in human history (and which still exists in many forms) should also be explored, but not in our present climate of denial.

* Blacks in Science, Ivan Van Sertima

Further Reading:

Blacks in Science, Ivan Van Sertima

Black Spark, White Fire, Richard Poe

Black Athena, Martin Bernal

A.B.C Aime Cesaire, Euzhan Palcy

Cy Grant September 2008

Cy Grant, ex RAF Flight Lieutenant, WW2, is well known as an actor and singer. He is also a qualified barrister, writer and cultural activist. He toured Aime Cesaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Return to my Native Land, trans. John Berger, Anna Bostock) as a one man show for 2 years around Britain in the late 1970's. Chairman of Drum Arts centre also in the 1970's & Director Concord Multicultural Festivals 1980's. He is a Member of the Scientific & Medical Network and an Hon Fellow University of Surrey, Roehampton and author of *Blackness & the Dreaming Soul*, Race, Identity & the

Materialistic Paradigm, Shoving Leopard 2007, *A Member of the RAF of Indeterminate Race*, a war memoir, Woodfield Publishing 2007, *Ring of Steel: pan sound & symbol.– the evolution of the Trinidad Steelpan*, Macmillan Caribbean 2000 & *Rivers of Time (Collected Poems) Naked Light* 2008 www.cygrant.fsnet.co.uk

footnote

The Association of London Authorities endorsed BHM in Britain in 1987, the very same year that saw last the Concord Multicultural Festival in Britain - a county wide event in Gloucestershire of which I was Director. The year before there had been a similar countywide Concord Festival in Devon. The previous 3 years had seen weekend Concord festivals in 20 of Britain's main inner cities. Concord was set up by me in the early 1980 to celebrate the cultural diversity within Britain as a result of the race riots that were rife at the time. Its object was to include all racial minorities and not just the Black community. At the time, however. The idea of Multiculturalism was resisted and our work though impressive, filling major Theatres throughout the country, never received the support that it needed from the Arts Council and County Councils and media .

The inauguration of Black History Month was a very poor response to what I believe is necessary if we are to achieve a fair society for all. Concord was not just about Black cultural events but there to celebrate the wide cultural diversity within Britain. Chapter 5, CONCORD, of my book *Blackness & the Dreaming Soul* gives a full account of those Festivals. A report on Concord in Devon, was also published by the Gulbenkian Foundation in 1987 [ironically the very year BHM was adopted in London] and provides a workable blue print for the arts, not only for the arts of minorities. Was all this work in vain? At the time it was virtually ignored by the media. Even today the Arts Council have not acknowledged what we achieved and could still do to foster good relations within society. They still are locked in the same pattern of condescension and separation. As far as I can see nothing much has changed in the last 20 years, - just lip service to multiculturalism.