

Reach Society

Building Connections

Patrons: Lord Herman Ouseley, Professor Trevor Williams & John Budu-Aggrey

Reach Society Think Tank Report 1: August 2015

What forms the cornerstone or bedrock of the Black British Community?

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek”. **President Barack Obama**

1. Origins of the Reach Society Think Tank

Contemporary discussion on the role of ethnicity in society, including its interplay with class, employment, health and opportunity are all too often fragmented. Moreover, the participants of such discussions are often limited to academics or policy makers while the voice and perspectives of the Black community is sometimes not given equal weight.

Reach Society recognises that there is an urgent need to correct this imbalance and provide a forum for identifying, discussing and offering practical and sustainable solutions for issues facing our community. To pursue this endeavour the **Reach Society Think Tank (or RSTT)** - a collaboration between Reach Society and professional individuals in the Black British community was formed. Documented in this report is the output from the RSTT’s inaugural discussion on the topic of:

What forms the cornerstone or bedrock of the Black British Community?

2. Executive Summary

The term Black British community is often used in both personal and media communication to refer to members of the African Caribbean community based in the UK. However, a definition that was agreed upon by participants in this roundtable discussion was more inclusive. The Black British community is diverse and it encompasses those people of Black Caribbean, Black African and Mixed Heritage. The 2011 census statistics support this observation, with the ‘Black’ community representing 3.4% of the total UK population; but it rises to almost 5% when people of Mixed Heritage from Caribbean and African origins are added.

Members of the roundtable acknowledged that this culturally rich community shares a wide range of common themes and lived experiences. These vary from shared stories and identification with ancestral struggles and popular culture, to common experiences of establishing family and social units in 21st Century Britain.

Overall, the participants identified the following elements of a common foundation which were: **faith and spirituality, race and ethnicity, family structure, unity, aspiration and education, cultural resilience and mobilisation.** These themes (or elements) and their wider implications are addressed below.

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3. Themes Discussed

Faith and spirituality: They were described by participants as playing an important role in the foundation of today's Black British community. The core values seen across different faith groups include integrity, honesty, selflessness and respect for others. And whilst church attendance is in relative decline in wider British society, it is holding firm in the Black British community, and these principles are still very much at work in the professional and personal relationships in the community.

Some participants were cautious about the contribution of faith and the church in the Black British community, given some historical aspects of church behaviour on issues such as equality and slavery. Nevertheless, it was agreed that some faith movements such as the Quakers were tireless advocates for the abolition of slavery, and today virtually all faith groups champion the cause of equality. Furthermore, all agreed that everyone is free to express their faith or religious beliefs as they see fit, and the Black British community actively participates in a range of faith groups.

Race and ethnicity: Participants viewed their race or ethnicity as another core element of the foundation of the Black Community. The concept of Black History, as a timeline of significant cultural and political experiences endured by contemporary and distant ancestors, was felt to act as a common feature of its identity. Black history month (or BHM), during October in the UK (and February in the USA) features events and activities that seek to engage young and old in the history of people of African origin.

Whilst BHM was intended to be a positive experience for the Black British Community, concerns were raised about the actual community engagement and contribution to the design of the activities rolled out in schools and elsewhere. It was felt that having a month long platform, in the UK, was good in principle. However, many recognised that school based activities fell short of the original objective which was to build cultural knowledge and esteem, and a positive identity amongst young people in the UK. One reason for this loss of focus is the misplaced belief that head teachers or the lead teachers have the necessary understanding, sensitivity or passion for BHM.

Participants also recognised the impact of negative experiences such as racism and discrimination encountered by members of the Black community, both overtly and covertly. Several participants noted the disproportionate representation of members of the Black British

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community in certain civil settings and institutions such as: over-representation as defendants within the criminal justice system; over-representation in unemployment, under-representation in management or leadership positions in the public and private sectors, and the lower educational attainment in both secondary and tertiary education.

Whilst these are areas of ongoing cause for concern, several participants remarked that there have been significant improvements in the educational attainment of young people in the Black British Community, over the last 7 years. And whilst this requires further work, a bleak picture should not be allowed to descend on a community that has produced, and continues to produce some of the brightest and most influential national and international figures.

On the matter of other ethnic groups, several members of the roundtable asked what lessons could be learnt from other ethnic groups with comparable history, namely, those arriving in the UK as post Second World War economic migrants from the Indian sub-continent and China. They have rich and diverse histories and have developed and maintained strong economic and cultural ties to the UK, similar to the Black community. However, on average, larger portions of their young people have achieved top grades in secondary education, and also go on to achieve higher average earnings as graduates.

Family structure, unity, aspiration and education: Most participants felt that structure and unity within the family was an integral feature of the Black British community. Women are perceived as playing a leading role in forging family unity and keepers of the flames of aspiration burning. The issue the small percentage of fatherless families was noted alongside the realisation that men do play important roles in families within the Black British community.

Without question, most communities in the UK, and across the world, aspire to a better life, with many in the community having the ambition to acquire knowledge and education in order to succeed, but these aspirations are realised to different degrees. Indeed, the Black British community must contend with structural hurdles or barriers such as institutional discrimination or prejudice, as well as the limited career options of their young people, especially those with poor or narrow educational attainment.

Participants felt discrimination and racism are barriers that affect most ethnic minorities in the UK. However, mitigating factors against these factors were having a strong sense of community

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and maintaining amity within ones community.

One participant raised the role of the Historic Black Colleges and Universities (or HBCU) in the USA for empowering individuals and strengthening the academic base of the African American community. The absence of the equivalent of the HBCU in the UK might help to explain the comparatively poor representation of people from the Black British community in UK universities (or Higher Education).

Cultural resilience and mobilisation: It was raised that key individuals together with the development of many groups or organisations within the Black British community have addressed, and continue to do so, the issues facing members of the community; highlighting a strong sense of engagement. For mental and physical health issues groups like [Black Mental Health UK](#) and [African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust ACLT](#) were formed. For spiritual and faith reasons the [Black Majority Churches](#) were developed, from the 1950s, to serve the Black community, all across the UK.

A participant raised the point that the Black British community continues to evolve through greater community collaboration. Participants felt that a key area requiring improvement is that of community leadership at local, regional and national levels.

Given that the highest proportions of the Black British community are resident in London and the Midland conurbations, the issue of how to achieve greater coordination across the country was raised, and the issue of what role London based organisations such as Reach Society might play in promoting collaborative leadership, beyond Greater London.

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4. Wider Implications

Defining questions: This roundtable discussion raised several questions about areas of needs for the Black British community in the 21st Century, namely:

- How do mature members of the community introduce and consistently share their core values with the younger generations, with particular reference to knowledge of self, and a sense of understanding ones legitimacy and power in the world?
- How do the contemporary views of the Black British community, from this roundtable, compare to those from other areas of the community? And can this yield meaningful change for all parts of the community?
- How can leadership and coordination on a regional and national level be achieved or improved, against the backdrop of limited number of dedicated institutions in the Black British community and the presence of ongoing and widespread structural obstacles?

Areas of consideration: On each of these questions, it was recognised by participants that the responsibility for the direction of travel lies within the Black British community. Such areas of consideration include:

- Institutions:* The benefits of establishing a set of institutions which would become beacons for progress and centres of excellence for fostering good relations, pioneering relevant research and nurturing future leaders was noted.
- Special interest groups:* The development and nurturing of special interest groups across junior and senior members of the community could provide an important role to facilitate change for the benefit of their members was also noted.
- Lessons from history:* Consider lessons from recent history such as the role of the Historic Black Colleges and Universities (or HBCU), established in the late 1800s in the USA for the purpose of serving a minority African American community that had just emerged from enslavement. Consideration should be given to how comparable institutions such as existing Black Supplementary Schools in the UK could be improved and expanded to meet the needs of the Black British community.

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5. Conclusions

It may be concluded that the roundtable participants felt that the foundation of the Black British community is comprised of some key components: **faith and spirituality; race and ethnicity; family structure, unity, aspiration and education; and cultural resilience and mobilisation.** By having these core components the Black British community remains robust and capable of addressing issues and challenges as it makes its way through the 21st Century in the UK.

6. Acknowledgements

This work was written by the members of the RSTT; they wish to thank all of the participants involved in the roundtable discussion, and in the preparation of the report.

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