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What role can digital heritage play in the re--imagining of national identities? England and its Icons

Rhiannon Mason and Zelda Baveystock

"So let me be equally blunt in my challenge to the heritage sector: if you are not part of the solution to this crisis of Britishness, you are part of the problem."

(Lammy 2005)

"Heritage is not an artifact or site. It is a process that uses objects and sites as vehicles for the transmission of ideas in order to satisfy various contemporary needs. It is a medium of communication, a means of transmission of ideas and values and a knowledge that includes the material, the intangible and the virtual. Heritage is a product of the present yet drawing upon an assumed imaginary past and an equally assumed imaginary future."

(Ashworth 2007: 2)

"Heritage" is increasingly invoked in Britain by politicians and policy makers as one means of repositioning British national identity to foster social cohesion. The first quotation, for example, is drawn from a speech in 2005 by David Lammy MP, who was at that time Minister for Culture in the British government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The speech, entitled, "Where now for Britain's shared heritage?", was delivered in an event hosted by the Heritage Lottery Fund at the British Museum. This chapter will explore how "heritage" is being defined within such

contexts, and being deployed as a resource for reframing relationships between identities and nations. We will discuss both "Britain" and "England" in recognition of their continual conflation and interdependence.

This study is premised on the idea that "national heritage" is enlisted as part of the process of "governmentality" and the first section examines this in the current British context. The second section outlines recent research findings which suggest changes in perceptions of national identities in Britain and the relevance of this for heritage. The final section considers the "ICONS of England" on--line project and what it reveals about the way that governmental discourses intersect with the wider heritage sector and populist discourses.

By examining a selection of so--called icons of Englishness from the site, we argue that this example of contemporary digital heritage illustrates some of the conflicting responses invoked by the process of defining Englishness and how these definitions continually refers back to ideas of Britishness. The process of redefining Englishness is, we argue, an essential step in the diversification of public notions of national heritage and of collective identity. This process is as important as the inclusion of previously marginalized groups and identities into the "national historical narrative." We conclude that this website offers an alternative forum in which the central suppositions underpinning England and Britain's national heritage can be problematized and unpicked. At the same time, we identify certain problems relating to the medium and its ability to generate an effective dialogue about national heritage.

Before looking at the case study, it is useful to revisit some pertinent themes in recent literature. "Heritage" can be defined in numerous ways (Graham and Howard 2008). At its simplest it "can be defined as properties and artifacts of cultural importance handed down from the past" (UK's Department of Culture, Media and Sport website). At its broadest Lord Charteris of Amisfield, as Chair of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, stated that "heritage is anything you want" (quoted in Hewison 1987:32). Laurajane Smith has argued that "there is, really, no such thing as heritage" (2006: 11). Smith's point is that nothing is inherently "heritage"; "… there is rather a hegemonic discourse about heritage, which acts to constitute the way we think, talk and write about heritage" (2006: 11). As Smith argues, the process of identifying, recognizing, and managing heritage is always political, partial and contested. Ashworth and Graham use the term "dissonant heritage" to refer "… to the discordance of lack of agreement and consistency as to the meaning of heritage" (2005: 5).

Heritage is dissonant because it is always held in tension between the competing pull of the universal and the particular, the collective and the individual (Ashworth and Graham 2005). While much attention focuses on the official and institutional aspect of heritage, its personal appeal is equally powerful. Bella Dicks attributes the popularity of what she terms "vernacular heritage" to its personal dimension and its ability to enable individuals to situate their sense of identity and past within a collective memory. Heritage "provides a means of appreciating the intersection between individual biographies and wider social and cultural changes" (2003: 126). Dicks sees this as symptomatic of a broader shift towards the "diffusion of an identity--centered

relationship with the past" (2003: 125). This understanding of heritage as a process and a mechanism for negotiating change is shared by Smith (2006: 308).

Although interest in heritage can be seen as a reaction to change, gaining acceptance of alternative definitions of heritage is often contested. This is especially so where they conflict with what Smith calls the "authorized heritage discourse": the official and publicly sanctioned – hegemonic – discourses of heritage. Like Smith, Stuart Hall has long drawn attention to the operation of hegemony in relation to what he terms "The Heritage'" particularly around the lack of representation of race and empire in Britain's "national story" (2005).

National heritage, in this sense, is part of what Bennett has termed the "public cultural and historical sphere" (quoted in Karp *et al.* 2006: 9). As part of the public cultural and historical sphere, national heritage is enlisted as part of the process not just of government but of "governmentality." Hall describes this as "how the state indirectly and at a distance induces and solicits appropriate attitudes and forms of conduct from its citizens" (2005: 24). It is in this sense, that we can read Ashworth and Graham's observation that "heritage is simultaneously knowledge, a cultural product and a political resource" (2005: 8).

Although "national heritage" can be seen as both constituted and enlisted by processes of governmentality, like the idea of "the nation", it is equally "flagged" and materialized through "banal" everyday, unofficial practices, customs, and habits (Billig 1995; Palmer 1998). For example, it is notable that people's use of the English flag at sporting events

has increased in recent years alongside calls for the official promotion of St George's day as a day of national celebration. The point here is that heritage is constructed at an individual, personal, and everyday level and is as much to do with immediate social groups and family context as with larger national frameworks and public, institutional practices. Indeed, Ashworth and Graham caution against over--stating the hegemonic dominance of "official heritage" particularly in relation to ideas of identity and sense of place. They argue that: "… the peoples, the identities, the images and the purposes are just all too plural to be reduced simplistically in this way" (2005: 4).

"National Heritage" in the British context

Many of these issues can be seen in debates about Britain's and England's national heritage and identity particularly in recent years. The creation since 1999 of separate, semi--autonomous devolved political bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has brought about many changes in the areas of politics, media, education, health, and the cultural and heritage sectors in the various countries of the UK (Mason 2007). In particular, it has problematized the position of England in the UK's parliamentary system and is testing the bonds of the Union especially in relation to the independence movement in Scotland. In 2007 Gordon Brown, a Scottish MP, became Prime Minister and head of the UK government in Westminster. 2007 marked the 300th anniversary of the Act of Union which joined the Kingdoms of Scotland and England into the United Kingdom of Great Britain.

Brown is a strong advocate of the Union and has given many speeches promoting the concept of Britishness and outlining what he sees to be British values. He has defined these as: "British tolerance, the British belief in liberty and the British sense of fair play" (speech at the Commonwealth Club, 27 February 2007) and "hard work, doing your duty and always trying to do the right thing." (Labor Party Conference, 24 September 2007). In January 2006, Brown proposed the idea of a national British day to mark "shared common values" and be "a celebration of who we are and what we stand for" (speech at the Fabian Society Conference, 14 January 2006).

National identity is also currently high on the political agenda because of concerns over domestic security and social cohesion, particularly following the bombings by home--grown terrorists in London in July 2005 and the attack on Glasgow airport in 2007. Although recent events have heightened concerns, multiculturalism has been a topical issue for some time, for example since riots broke out in 2001 in the northern English towns of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford. In September 2005, the chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, triggered public debate by claiming that Britain was "sleepwalking our way to segregation" (Phillips 2005). Phillips argued that policy had over--emphasized differences between ethnic groups at the expense of their commonalities, although this is disputed by others (Modood 2005). Debates have been further underscored by changing patterns of immigration to Britain since the expansion of the EU membership in 2004 and 2007 to include 12 additional nations, principally in Eastern Europe (Vertovec 2006).

Shifting loyalties

A raft of studies by policy bodies and think-tanks suggest that Britishness generally may be in decline or in transition, with growing differentiation between people's sense of national identity in the UK's constituent nations and amongst different ethnic groups (ETHNOS 2005; NatCen 2007; Stone and Muir 2007). The reports suggest a growing identification with Englishness and Stone and Muir warned that this was frequently defined in a narrow, ethnic way rather than a more civic, inclusive fashion albeit identification varied according to class, generation, and educational background. A report on diversity and citizenship in relation to the English school curriculum found much confusion and negativity surrounding ideas of British and English national identity and heritage; it identified this as a central barrier to the promotion of diversity and citizenship (DfES 2007: 30).

Stone and Muir's report further argued there had been an increase in people's sense of identification at the most local level – their locality or town (56 per cent) – as opposed to the national (25 per cent) across all generations (2007: 13). It reported a shift towards defining Britishness in terms of values such as free speech, justice and tolerance and less with state public figures and traditional institutions, with the exception of the BBC and the National Health Service.

This discursive shift correlates with Brown's attempt to redefine and promote Britishness as a set of values. Despite this, the overall findings suggest that those wishing to reinvigorate public enthusiasm for Britishness: "… will have to reverse a current trend and that their endeavors will not be equally well received in different parts

of the UK" (Stone and Muir 2007: 10). A study into constitutional change and identity which examined attitudes held by Scottish and English people living in Scotland concurred: "There remains substantial evidence that British nationals, let alone newcomers, do not have much shared understanding of the term" (Bechhofer *et al.* 2006).

Most of these reports focused on Britishness but all inevitably discussed Englishness because national identity can only be understood relationally. This is particularly acute in the case of England because the distinction between Britishness and Englishness is less clearly articulated than with Scottishness or Welshness and Britishness. Some historians have cautioned against over-stating this apparent "identity-crisis" by pointing to a long precedent of complex and multiple identities within Britain's constituent nations (Kenny, English, and Hayton 2008). Notwithstanding this, the evidence above suggests a convergence of factors which is currently intensifying public and political concern about national identity and national heritage.

National heritage and social cohesion

Against this backdrop, David Lammy's challenge to the heritage sector that "if you are not part of the solution to this crisis of Britishness, you are part of the problem" assumes its full resonance (2005). During his time as Minister for Culture (2005–07) Lammy spoke widely about Britishness, empire, race, slavery, black and minority heritage, and social cohesion. His speeches often draw on his own experiences as British-born growing up in Tottenham, London, of parents who were 1950s migrants from the

former British colony of Guyana. He also speaks about his experiences of talking to different ethnic groups within Britain about their own sense of heritage and is explicit about the link between heritage and national identity.

> Heritage comes from the same root as inheritance. It's about what we want to pass on to future generations. Our responsibility for heritage extends not just to the preservation of ancient bricks and mortar but to the custodianship of a legacy of ideas about Britain and Britishness.
>
> (Lammy 2005)

While Lammy brings a particularly personal note to the subject, previous holders of this post have been equally quick to promote Britain's diversity (Smith 1998). Indeed, concerns over multiculturalism and national heritage precede the current debates by at least three decades (Littler and Naidoo 2005:15). From the 1990s, in particular, a number of reports increased awareness of structural differences between the perceptions and experiences of Britain's heritage held by different groups of visitors and non-visitors along lines of race and ethnicity (Desai and Thomas 1998). The results are too numerous to cover here but it is fair to say that there have been many initiatives which have addressed cultural diversity in the UK museum context prompting organizations, particularly with public funding, to review their collections, exhibitions, marketing, audiences, recruitment, and workforce training.

This activity has produced commendable results. However, much of the activity around diversity and heritage so far has been about diversifying the national story by attempting

to include those previously marginalized. While evidently a necessary step, if the core is left unchallenged, the center/periphery hierarchy remains intact. Stuart Hall, for example, has argued that:

"… the majority, mainstream versions of the Heritage should revise their own self--conceptions and rewrite the margins into the center, the outside into the inside. This is not so much a matter of representing 'us' as of representing more adequately the degree to which 'their' history entails and has always implicated 'us' across the centuries, and vice versa. … The first task, then, is re--defining the nation, reimagining 'Britishness' or 'Englishness' itself in a more profoundly inclusive manner."

(Hall, 2005: 31)

Re--imagining "England's heritage" online: displaying dissonance

Recognition of the need to profile these debates publicly has motivated some large scale projects. One of these is the ICONS of England website (www.icons.org.uk), on which members of the public can nominate, comment on and vote for items perceived to be symbolic of England's national heritage. Given its participatory nature and its attempt to question mainstream ideas of Englishness, it represents a particularly apt way to examine competing discourses surrounding national heritage. It also illustrates the continual slippage between Britishness and Englishness even on a site explicitly designated to be about England.

Clearly, the representativeness of ICONS should not be overstated. Methodologically, many of the same issues which pertain to the analysis of museum--visitor books apply (Macdonald 2005). Contributors will be self--selecting while many users will visit but never post a comment. Some visitors/users may come from cultural backgrounds which inhibit their inclination to contribute. Use of websites also requires a certain amount of cultural capital, technological resources and web literacy all of which relate to levels of income and education. As is so often the case in visitor books, comments will arise in response to other comments so that particular threads will be foregrounded and others potentially relevant points may be neglected. This issue is particularly pertinent in the case of this website which is specifically organized around the principle that users should read and respond to other people's comments. Despite the need for caution, we consider this website worthy of study as it so clearly illustrates many of the debates outlined above and because it offers a rare opportunity to see the processes of "heritage--making" made public.

ICONS was initially envisaged as an online collection of "England's most cherished cultural treasures" (Culture Online 2007), and in this way could potentially be viewed as a digital museum of England. In 2007 it promoted itself as "a living portrait of a country, a people and a way of life (...)." ICONS was commissioned as a £1.1m flagship project by Culture Online, a Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) initiative which funded projects in England only. From the outset the ICONS Advisory Board discussed whether the site should become ICONS of Britain and not just of England, but found itself restricted by the funding arrangements (minutes of 13 October 2005).

The ICONS of England project is interesting for what it reveals about the way that government policy intersects with both the heritage sector and populist discourses. Culture Online was launched by DCMS in 2000 with the aim of building engagement with arts and culture through technology, with a particular emphasis on working with "hard--to--reach" groups. ICONS thus originally had the dual aims of encouraging awareness and use of real heritage sites, including museums and galleries, alongside a technological agenda to increase web literacy. However, importance was also placed on the interactive and collaborative potential of the internet; the site was intended create an open forum in which discussions on the nature of contemporary Englishness could be played out and debated.

How ICONS works

The website operates on several levels. There are nominations for icons posted (and commented on) by members of the public, celebrities or specific institutional partners such as the National Trust or English Heritage, and then a "top tier" of nominations which have been agreed by the Advisory Board to be an approved part of the ICONS "collection." These "approved" ICONS contain extended web content, including associated historical and contextual information, suggestions for places to visit, games, lesson plans, curriculum links and further resources. The weighting of the website in its first eighteen months of operation (from January 2006) was thus unequally balanced between the approved collection of less than 100 icons, and 1,165 would--be icons--in--waiting. While the editorial and moderation processes of the site will be the subject of

further research (the 1,165 nominations listed were in themselves selected from nearly 8,000 nominations received in all – see Holden 2007), the site can be seen to reflect both the processes of heritage authorization from the "top down" and the dissonant nature of heritage "in the making."

The extent and variety of content on the site illustrates the diversity of reactions to this challenge of representing a nation iconographically. The site does not attempt to segment or disaggregate the ICONS into categories. We have therefore drawn on a study conducted by ETHNOS into *Citizenship and Belonging* which set out to categorize popular responses to the question "What is Britishness?" into eight "dimensions" (2005: 6). We have utilized these dimensions to loosely group what is seen to represents England and Englishness as articulated on the ICONS site. A brief outline of the categories follows, with examples of some approved icons, to indicate the project's scope. Readers not familiar with British history and culture may find it helpful to consult the detailed explanations of each icon on the website:

- *Geography*: Landscape and topography feature strongly in both the approved and unapproved icons, with the former including the Peak and the Lake Districts, the White Cliffs of Dover and the Thames. Given the underlying aim to encourage visitation of cultural heritage sites, there is also a strong emphasis on traditional built heritage: from Stonehenge to Blackpool Tower. Some content is generic rather than specific: the hedge, the parish church, the pub and the phone box.

- *National symbols:* These include the flag of St. George, the oak tree, the rose, the bobby (policeman), the bowler hat, the robin and the V--sign.

- *People:* The ICONS Advisory Board took the decision that people would be expressly excluded from the site, "so that current day pop stars did not skew the vote" (Minutes of 13 October 2005). However, mythical and literary figures such as Robin Hood, Doctor Who, Sherlock Holmes and Alice in Wonderland are all featured.

- *Values and attitudes:* Only one English value – the stiff upper lip – makes it onto the approved list. Unapproved nominations also include good manners, a sense of humor, working too hard, and queuing. However, it is arguable that the underlying significance of many ICONS is their partial representation of other English values or attitudes: for example, Monty Python is commended as "the supreme expression of English eccentricity" (comment posted by R1 from Australia).

- *Language:* The English language is represented by the Oxford English Dictionary.

- *Cultural habits and behavior:* Aside from geography, this is possibly the largest category of nominations, ranging through various sports (cricket, rugby, Wimbledon and the FA Cup), to food and drink (cheddar cheese, cup of tea, fish

and chips, the pint, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding) to cultural practices such as fox hunting and Morris dancing.

- *Achievements:* Technological, scientific, literary and creative achievements include specific works, like the *Origin of the Species*, *Pride and Prejudice* and the Lindisfarne Gospels; works of art (the Haywain; Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII); inventions and industrial designs (the Spitfire, the Mini, the Rolls Royce); and popular songs (*Jerusalem* and *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*). Also symbols of particular eras in English history, e.g. Domesday Book and Magna Carta.

Problematizing "National Heritage"

The apparent randomness of this eclectic list supports the initial discussion of heritage. It reinforces the comments of both Lord Charteris and Smith in that "heritage" can be whatever people choose to identify as such, and anything has the potential to become "heritage" if it is identified and sufficiently acknowledged as "heritage" in a publicly recognized forum. It is also an unusually explicit example of "heritage in the making" and the authorizing of national heritage. The nomination process operates to sift and shift (or not in some cases) the icons from the status of personal choice to publicly sanctioned national "heritage" through a double mechanism of individual, public user-- voting and collective, private committee selection.

There is further evidence of an "authorized heritage discourse" at work, in particular with the extensive amount of traditional built heritage vying for position in the nominated listings. In this section of the site it appears every professional heritage manager, marketer or supporters' group in the country has nominated their own site, monument or museum. The approval of only a limited number of these may point to an English spirit of fair play, but is more likely to be a deliberate (and deliberated) attempt by the Board to ensure an even geographical distribution in the collection.

This is evidenced most clearly in the "ICONS Atlas" section of the site where stylized pictorial icons are depicted on a map of England divided into its regions. Stonehenge thus stands for the southwest, the Angel of the North for the north east and Blackpool Tower for the North West. Cornwall is represented by the Eden Project, a highly successful ecological visitor attraction opened in 2001 as a means of regenerating a former clay pit. Eden is architecturally and technologically innovative, but its inclusion appears to point most closely to the original aims of the project to promote "take--up" of official cultural resources from both local residents and tourists. The heritage--as--tourism dimension is reinforced by subsequent levels of information offered via the "Atlas." If users click on each region on the map they are led to a list of standard museums, galleries, heritage sites and visitor experiences, only some of which are directly or tangentially related to other ICONS.

In this way, the site acts as a portal to the official heritage sector and tourist industry exemplifying how "national heritage" is invariably bound--up with tourism. This means that the site addresses many different "publics" simultaneously. The mix of

official/collective and unofficial/personal heritage again refers back to issues raised earlier; namely that "heritage" continually blurs boundaries of public and private, official and unofficial, state and personal, collective and individual, institutionalized and informal. This is arguably always the case but is particularly explicit in the web 2.0 context.

Amongst users' comments, most frequent debate is elicited on the definitions of Britishness and Englishness. Many of the examples above are argued by contributors to be the former rather than the latter. Other contributors perpetuate the elision of the terms by positively affirming icons as typically British (rather than English), without apparently realizing this is not the overall purpose of the site. These tensions are apparent throughout, but are particularly noticeable in some of the choices of the historic environment. London for example is represented by the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey and Big Ben, all of which are arguably symbols of the British state (in the guise of monarchy, church and parliament). Big Ben received a comparatively high number of comments (40 published), most of which agree that the building is internationally recognized, but dispute whether it is a "symbol of England" or "a key British icon." Debates over the Englishness of the London icons perhaps support Stone and Muir's observations of the growth of local identity over national; several correspondents from outside of London complain about the dominance of the capital in the national imaginary. As one contributor from "glorious Devon" writes:

> "I was under the impression we were voting for English Icons? London is a tiny little bit of it, and quite insignificant to most people, apart from those who live

there. London and all it contains is not an icon... Could this sad city not have its own site and stop cluttering up this one???"

Other common debates foreground the divide between ethnic and civic definitions of nationalism demonstrating not only dissonance but contributors' efforts to assert competing definitions, embrace or refute change, and invoke criteria to justify inclusions or exclusions. A vocal minority of users stringently refutes all the attempts to include multicultural elements as part of the English national heritage stating that they are simply not "from" England. Such comments appear to be premised on a definition of Englishness which for some respondents is not merely white, but also exclusively Anglo--Saxon in origin. Thus the Tower of London is castigated for being "a symbol of Anti--Englishness," the home of "swaggering invaders" with "un--Anglo--Saxon" architecture. One extremist even comments that for this reason the Tower "should be demolished" – a radical approach to dealing with dissonant heritage which if pushed to its logical conclusions would see the end to vast swathes of heritage preservation. Interestingly, Hadrian's Wall is not similarly criticized as the cultural product of an invading Roman force, but is rather accepted as a World Heritage Site with only three uncontroversial public comments.

Attempts to "rewrite the margins into the center,", by flagging up the centrality of multiculturalism to England's heritage, are received equally controversially and rarely demonstrate the kind of inclusive "re--imagining" of Englishness as envisioned by Stuart Hall. The SS Empire Windrush and the Notting Hill Carnival are both in the collection, inspiring some of the more divergent and heated responses. Those with a

more ethnic nationalist perspective condemn the inclusion of these events as politically correct and see them as revealing forces of authority at work behind the site. Those of a more apparently civic nationalist persuasion seem prepared to admit them as icons, but argue that they are British and not English. Only a very few perceive the symbolic power of these icons to lie in acceptance of multiculturalism per se, as evidence of a British/ English value of the sort championed by Gordon Brown. For one contributor, the Carnival is a symbol of:

"…how 'Englishness' has, contradictorily, come to be defined by our ability to assimilate and celebrate the best that immigrants have brought to our society. It is this open--mindedness that I am most proud of when I tell people I'm English."

(posted by R2 from Nottingham)

For another commentator:

"It represents the vibrance [sic], color and positivity of modern England. It shows how people can feel comfortable in England to express themselves and celebrate their identity, and not oppressed by a requirement to conform to some imagined norms. It also shows that everyone's welcome at the party in England."

(posted by R3 from London)

In general, what is lacking from much of the public commentary is an understanding of the longer history of multiculturalism: the fundamental interconnectedness of English

heritage with other nations and peoples. This runs counter to the political aspirations of the site. In a speech on "Capturing the Public Value of Heritage" made shortly after the site's launch, David Lammy lauded the ICONS project's ability to "unpick" traditional heritage and reposition it within a broader, more culturally inclusive discourse. Identifying the cup of tea as an English icon, Lammy stressed its potency as a multicultural symbol. In his words, "it was the tea--pickers of Sri Lanka and the Lascar dockers of Woolwich as much as the tea--merchants of Surrey who established the Englishness of a cup of tea" (Lammy 2006). But while the cup of tea does indeed feature in the ICONS collection, the vast majority of public comments reference the symbolism of the *act* of tea drinking and not its complex social history. This is expressed most eloquently in the following contribution:

> Isn't it obvious? It is the way we deal with disaster, fear, war, death. It is the way we welcome a friend or stranger, it is how we express love, sympathy, compassion, it is our condolence in hard times, our pick--me--up when we're tired, our anodyne when we are sick and our comforting cup when go to bed. Tetley, PG Tips, Yorkshire, Barry's, Tesco's, whatever you drink, it is our old standby, or friend, and a true national icon.
>
> (posted by R4 from London)

This example reiterates the plurality of meanings that people attach to heritage and how these draw on their own suppositions, perceptions and contexts, often contrary to what might be anticipated by those involved in the "managing" of national heritage. Tellingly, given that ICONS has chosen to represent specifically a cup of tea (rather

than the more common mug), other contributors point out the implicit class distinctions of tea as cultural practice in Britain. Commentators debate social protocols such as whether milk should be put in first or last, as well as the propriety of having two teapots (a chipped one for the family, and a "good" one for company). Ultimately, tea is viewed as an inclusive icon not because of its multicultural history, but because of its universal consumption: "…it is enjoyed by English of all classes, races and creeds" (posted from R5 from Birmingham).

The contradictory nature of the criteria by which heritage is judged is further illustrated by comparing the legitimacy of tea against another culinary icon, chicken tikka masala, which is not perceived to be legitimate by many commentators. In many ways, this curry dish is equal in symbolism to the humble "cuppa" in terms of its coupling of popular consumption with representation of the history of Empire. In 2001, the then foreign secretary, Robin Cook, famously declared chicken tikka masala to be "a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences" (Wintour 2001).

While 13 public comments on ICONS hardly amount to a representative sample, nearly half are resolutely against the nomination. Despite ICONS' presentation of the astonishing statistic that "Marks and Spencers sells more than 18 tonnes of it sandwiches every week" and that it is "the most ordered dish across our nation's 8,000 curry houses," at the time of writing 75 per cent of responses through the "vote" function of the site equally rejected it as an icon of England. In this case ubiquity of consumption does not appear to equal acceptance as a national cultural habit. Further

research is needed to understand why tea is so readily accepted as an English icon, but curry is not. These two products have similar histories so why do they elicit such drastically different responses? Is it an expression of the comparative recentness of the curry eating habit in Britain, or the fact that despite being a dish invented for the English, it is still predominantly served up by those perceived as immigrants or "others"?

Heritage on--line: forum or soap--box?

The degree of dissonance shown between nominations on ICONS leads us to question how this example of digital heritage operates in terms of providing a forum for dialogue, and the extent to which it is able to promote debate and understanding rather than merely function as a public platform for airing diverse views. While Lammy stressed the role of heritage in helping to "build a Britain at ease with its present because it understands, values and is able to access its past," the comments written on the site could be read as indicative of a limited understanding or valuing of differing points of view. It appears that the necessity of moderation may result, on the whole, in a series of unconnected public comments rather than a genuine exchange of ideas. However, it is important to recognize that this relates to the nature of the medium; fragmentation is an inherent feature of on--line asynchronous communication of the kind utilized here. In many ways the design of the website lends itself best to browsing rather than in--depth exploration, and follows the conventions set by other online forums in this respect. Further assessment of the success or otherwise of websites in

supporting debate of such kinds will require an innovative methodology attentive to the characteristics of the medium.

In the meantime, what ICONS confirms is that as a medium for public debates about heritage, the web has both advantages and disadvantages. It creates new opportunities for participation and multivocality but is accompanied by the risk of producing fragmentation and a cacophony of viewpoints. Indeed, we might question the appropriateness of attempting to conduct this kind of national debate via a global medium. It is important to note that users contribute from all over the world thus further complicating both the parameters of this discussion of "national heritage," and the aspiration that the project would speak to tensions in UK. It confirms how challenging it is, in practice, to enlist or position heritage in relation to national identity in a web 2.0 context. ICONS also exemplifies how public understanding of heritage is continually being remade and always inflected by the specificity of the medium.

At the same time, it is important to remember that there are multiple audiences who may be visiting the site and reading the comments. What we are unable to judge, as yet, are the reactions of those who read but do not otherwise contribute by posting their views. The publicists for ICONS have assumed that "Different communities will learn a lot about each other's icons, bringing people closer in understanding" (press release, 10 January 2006). While the first half of the statement is undoubtedly possible, it will require further research before we can assess the likelihood of concomitant understanding.

Despite the technological challenges, ICONS represents a timely opportunity to see the processes by which national heritage is defined, articulated, and contested in action and in public. Viewed in the broader context of recent public debates about shifting national loyalties in Britain, this case study also illuminates the interconnectedness of national heritage, politics and governmentality. Whether digital heritage of this kind is really able to play the kind of socially cohesive role envisaged for it remains the subject of further study.

Acknowledgements

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