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**The 'global' in the city economy: multicultural economic development in**

**Birmingham**

Cheryl McEwan\*, Jane Pollard\*\*, Nick Henry\*\*

\* Department of Geography, University of Durham

\*\* Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, University of Newcastle

Address for correspondence:

Dr Cheryl McEwan  
Department of Geography  
Science Site  
South Road  
Durham DH1 3LE  
Tel: 0191 3341941  
Fax: 0191 3341800  
Email: [cheryl.mcewan@durham.ac.uk](mailto:cheryl.mcewan@durham.ac.uk)

## **Re-visioning a ‘global city’: multicultural economic development in Birmingham**

### **Abstract**

This paper draws on critiques of ‘global cities’ to conceptualise Birmingham, the UK’s second largest metropole, as a ‘global’ city by highlighting forms of economic globalisation that draw on the city’s residents, their histories and their social and cultural networks. The paper illustrates some of the diversity and significance of minority ethnic economic activity within Birmingham and the potential this holds for its future economic development, focusing on examples from three transnational networks (Chinese business networks, ethnic food manufacturing and the Bhangra music industry). The paper signals a rather different understanding of ‘global’ as it relates to economic advantage, transnationalism and ethnic diversity within cities in general, and Birmingham in particular. We suggest that this different understanding of the global has important policy implications, not simply in terms of economic representations of the city, but also in terms of developing the possibilities of such transnational networks and engaging with the constraints facing them. We argue that encouraging a more *relational* way of thinking about cities like Birmingham has the potential for advancing social wellbeing by influencing socio-economic policy and practice. We use the example of Birmingham, therefore, to engage broader debates about alternative paths of ‘global’ economic, social and cultural investment for UK (and other) cities.

## **Introduction**

In a recent treatise on transnational urbanism, Smith (2001) argues for the need to 'historicize the Global City' (p.61-63). He argues that a historical perspective reveals 'globalisation' not as a recent all encompassing system of economic power but rather as an historically specific, variant, and contested set of economic and social practices (see also Held *et al.*, 1999). In turn,

The urban future... is far less predictable but far more interesting than the grand narrative of global capital steam-rolling and swallowing local political elites and pushing powerless people around... Rather than viewing global cities as central expressions of the global accumulation of capital, all cities can then be viewed in the fullness of their particular linkages with the worlds outside their boundaries (Smith, 2001: 71).

Furthermore, in addition to acknowledging the need to historicise 'the global city', Ley (2004) has argued that prevailing accounts of 'global cities' are limited by their economic tendencies and related suppression of political and cultural domains. His mission is to open up 'globe talk' (2004:162) by acknowledging the agency and everyday lived experiences that constitute cosmopolitan, transnational spaces. For Ley, the privileging of 'a view from above' (p. 154) has meant that the voices of dwellers in global cities has, too often, been absent in accounts of these cities. In this paper, we draw on these critiques to explore Birmingham, the UK's second largest metropole, as a 'global' city by highlighting forms of economic globalisation that draw on the city's residents, their histories and their social and cultural networks.

Birmingham's regeneration programmes during the 1980s and 1990s mirrored those of many other British and North American cities based around 'flagship' projects and the desire to create profitable spaces for predominantly middle-class consumption (Hubbard 1996, Henry and Passmore 1999). Moreover, as Sandercock (2003) has suggested, this prestige-based city centre regeneration reproduced existing

social, economic and cultural exclusions, which in Birmingham are also racialised, as substantial resources were diverted from the city's inner areas to fund these projects (see also Loftman and Nevin 1996a, 1996b). Despite their economic, social and political marginalisation and exclusion from representations of the city, however, Birmingham's minority ethnic communities have long been a source of economic vitality and innovation.

In attempting to re-vision Birmingham's contemporary economic place in the world, the paper develops an account based on the distinctiveness of an economy rooted (and routed) in transnational networks; in other words, a distinctiveness drawn from the city's multicultural population and their particular linkages with worlds beyond the city's boundaries (see also Scott, 2001). The intention is, therefore, to signal a rather different understanding of 'global' as it relates to economic advantage, transnationalism (in the form of cross-border connections, see Vertovec, 1999; 2001) and ethnic diversity within cities in general, and Birmingham in particular. This different understanding of the global has important policy implications, not simply in terms of economic representations of the city, but also in terms of developing the possibilities of such transnational networks and engaging with the constraints that they face. Significantly, Birmingham City Council has recently recognised the need to revisit its strategic vision to focus on 'place making' as well as 'place marketing' in an attempt to link immigrant and poor neighbourhoods with the downtown economy (Sandercock 2003).

In what follows, we develop these arguments by illustrating some of the diversity and significance of minority ethnic economic activity within Birmingham, and the potential this holds for its future economic development. Our illustrations focus on examples from three transnational networks: Chinese business networks,

ethnic food manufacturing and the Bhangra music industry. We conclude by suggesting that Birmingham is a working example of multicultural economic development, whilst acknowledging the problems inherent in the privileging of ethnicity by global capitalism and the uncritical celebration of multiculturalism. In so doing, we aim to encourage a more *relational* way of thinking about cities like Birmingham, as a place that can be conceived in terms of “the articulation of social relations” (Massey 1994, 120) produced by its diverse population. These relations are both located within Birmingham and stretched beyond it, tying the city to wider relations, places and processes (*ibid.*; see also Amin 2004). This conceptualisation, we argue, is important politically because it facilitates the exploration of the conditions under which these networks may either have the potential for advancing social wellbeing or, alternatively, (re-)generating exploitation and exclusion.

### **Minority ethnic business in Birmingham**

Birmingham has received little attention as a ‘global city’, yet its place in the global economy is evolving in new ways that are often related to its multiculturalism, post-colonialism and the transnationalism of many of its residents. As a destination for overseas investment, through its historical (colonial) links as the ‘workshop of the world’ (Bryson *et al.*, 1996), and its postcolonial and other migratory paths, Birmingham can claim to be a multicultural city. The 2001 census revealed that 26.4% of the city’s population categorised themselves as other than ‘White’, with 19.5% of the population (over 190,000) identifying as Asian/Asian British (Office of National Statistics, 2001). The West Midlands region, with the exception of London, has the lowest proportion of people identifying themselves as White (88.8% compared with 90.9% for England as a whole) and above average proportions of White Irish,

Mixed White and Black Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean people (*ibid.*; see also Barrett *et al.*, 2000). The argument here is that this diversity is recognised as a strength and, indeed, as a route to economic development (Henry, 1998; Henry and Passmore, 1999; Henry *et al.*, 2002).

If we start to look beyond the traditional ‘global city’ imaginaries of contemporary regeneration schemes what other accounts of economic life in the city might be revealed? In terms of ethnicity, Birmingham’s economic position is constructed through, and interwoven with, numerous minority ethnic economic networks, some more visible than others. Birmingham’s ‘overseas Chinese’ population, for example, is prominent in property development within the city. The areas of Sparkbrook and Sparkhill (see Figure 1) include Pakistani banks and the city will shortly become home to the first branch of the new Islamic Bank of Britain Plc to be located outside London. The formation of Britain’s first Irish Business Association in the city is another example of how some of Birmingham’s economic networks are identified primarily by their ethnicity (Griffin, 1998). Although ‘white’ business groups do not usually identify themselves in ethnicised terms, the Irish business community in Birmingham is constructing an ethnic identity based on ‘minority white’ experiences. It is explicit about Irishness and economic advantage, and includes any business of Irish origin or with trading or cultural links with Ireland.

The production of particular commodities has also become associated with (minority) ethnicity within the city, for example, ethnic foods and particular musical styles (discussed subsequently). Birmingham’s multicultural and transnational economic activities extend across a range of economic operations and products. The Sparkhill area is the centre for the south Asian jewellery quarter, the retailing of clothing, sarees and other textiles. Perhaps less well known is the Greek-Cypriot fish-

frying network which, as early as 1989, constituted 25% of Birmingham's 300 fish and chip shops (Stewart, 1989). Today, the city's halal butchers number more than fifty; Birmingham's National Halal Centre is growing through demand from non-Muslims and is exporting goods such as halal baby food throughout Europe.

**[insert Figure 1 here]**

More widely celebrated is the success of the 'Birmingham balti'. Birmingham and the West Midlands region is world famous for the production and consumption of the Kashmiri balti, a hybrid product of British Asian cultures that has also been 'exported' to other cities in the UK. The balti is identified with a particular set of migrants to, and residents of, Birmingham and its region. These migrants have redefined this traditional dish so that it combines their ethnic roots with living in a specific western city.

Although data is scarce, some figures (which use the limited, rigid framework of Census ethnic descriptions) suggest that up to 33% of Birmingham's business activity occurs within minority ethnic owned enterprises (*The Economist*, 1998). The possibilities for continued development of this business activity are myriad. For example, Eastern Foods have launched a range of halal Chinese meals for British Muslims who otherwise cannot eat in Chinese restaurants (*Birmingham Voice*, 2000). Another example is the 1993 establishment of the Birmingham/Mirpur Friendship Association (around 90,000 people in Birmingham originate from the Kashmiri district of Mirpur). The Chambers of Commerce in both cities are now incorporated into this Association and are currently in active collaboration to develop and extend commercial links between the two cities. Furthermore, the recognition of this particular migratory path has seen 'fusion housing' - highly flexible panel and frame concrete structures - proposed by community architects Shillam and Smith for

development in Birmingham's predominantly Kashmiri-populated districts of Saltley and Small Heath (Glancey, 1999). Finally, Birmingham Chamber of Commerce has been involved in a recruitment exercise in Mumbai to bring Indian information technology specialists to the city to fill a skills gap within the local (and national) economy. This has the potential to position Birmingham within global IT networks (BBC Midlands Today, 7/9/00) [1].

The range of 'ethnic' economic activity illustrated above derives from the ever-changing but historically circumscribed migratory paths of the residents of Birmingham. The roots of Birmingham's economy are derived from its centrality within a (European) colonial past. A key question to ask of these illustrations is to what extent might the city's economic future draw on its post-colonialism and multiculturalism (Jacobs, 1996; Fincher and Jacobs, 1998; Sandercock, 1998, 2003)? In what follows, we explore specific ethnic-based transnational networks in the city and the trading links they incorporate and that might imply a rather different concept of 'the global city'. Traditionally, such examples of business networks are likely to have been studied under the rubric of 'ethnic entrepreneurship'. The theoretical models of 'replacement labour', 'ethnic niche/enclave' and 'middleman minority' amongst others all highlight the 'marginality' and 'sub-optimal' operation of many businesses formed through ethnic entrepreneurship (Wilson and Portes, 1980; Aldrich *et al.*, 1984; Ward and Jenkins, 1984; Ward 1985). With ethnicity defined, explicitly or implicitly, as "a possible outcome of the patterns by which intra- and inter-group interactions are structured" (Waldinger *et al.*, 1990: 32), these literatures also often emphasise sources of competitive support (networks, friendship, family, shared value systems, etc.), which are derived from spatial concentration (Greene, 1997).

More recent framings of ethnic business networks include research into the ‘informal sector’ (Waldinger and Lapp, 1993), often couched in the terms of ‘the Third World comes to the First’ (Portes *et al.*, 1989; Sassen, 1994) [2], and some recent analyses acknowledge the importance of place and broader institutional links (see for example the ‘mixed embeddedness’ approach of Kloosterman *et al.* 1999). In the work of Light and Gold (2000, 24-25), these literatures are synthesised to identify three concepts reflecting different aspects of ‘the ethnic economy’ in the USA: the ethnic ownership economy (consisting of business owners and their co-ethnic helpers and workers), the ethnic enclave economy (referring to the territorialisation of such ethnic ownership economies) and the ethnic-controlled economy (referring to numerical clustering of co-ethnic employees in industries and occupations allowing them to exert appreciable economic power).

While not denying the (political and) analytical power of these approaches in advancing understanding, we argue that a relational analysis of Birmingham’s global economies allows a further perspective on ethnic entrepreneurship. As Albrow (1997: 51) argues, the competitive advantage of ethnic businesses may derive precisely from their ability to draw upon networks that “extend as far as their resources and will to use the communication at their disposal”. In this sense, competitive advantage can be as much a product of international and transnational links as of agglomeration and, in the case of immigrant communities, the possible resources at their disposal are both transnational and local (as is their ethnic definition).

Some networks in Birmingham reveal economic activities drawing on diasporic links, both local and transnational, to create unique and competitive products and services. In this sense we want to move away from ‘out of the ordinary’ notions of ethnic entrepreneurialism and emphasise that these networks are

increasingly *business as usual* in Birmingham. This is not ‘Third World comes to First’ through ethnic entrepreneurial sweatshops; rather these economic activities should be framed within the literatures of economic geography concerned with ‘new industrial spaces’, ‘networks’ and ‘commodity chains’. We argue that Birmingham’s transnational economic networks illustrate two points. First, and following Werbner, they highlight the relational qualities of the city’s economy in which,

space needs to be conceptualised not as territory or circumscribed locality but as networked and socially produced through the manufacture and flow of distinctive goods between nodal points, vertically as well horizontally organized (Werbner 2001, 673).

Second, while accepting that these commodities have relative cultural value in and of themselves (see Werbner 1999, 575), these examples illustrate that the commodities produced have an economic presence that is, and ought to be, increasingly significant to urban economies. While often difficult to measure or classify in traditional economic terms, we argue that these transnational networks are producing new hybrid products of economic worth and with distinctive geographies.

## **Transnational economic networks in Birmingham**

### **1. Chinese business networks**

Although people identifying as Chinese make up only 1.2 % of Birmingham’s population (ONS, 2001), in 1987 the City Council designated an area of the city as a Chinese Quarter, now referred to as the Chinese/Markets Quarter. This serves as a resource for the city’s Chinese community. It contains Birmingham’s Chinese Youth Centre, the Chinese Community Centre, China Court Business Centre, two health centres, a selection of solicitors, accountants and consultants, foreign exchange

facilities and a wide range of Chinese supermarkets and restaurants. More problematically, it also provides “an element of exotic spectacle” (Clive Jackson, BCC, interview 17.9.97, in Dean, 1997) for both Birmingham’s population and its visitors. Unlike the ‘Chinatowns’ of other major cities (Anderson, 1988; 1990; 1991; Li, 1994; Olds, 1996; Mitchell, 1997), it is not a major residential area, but was designed with the intention of using an explicit notion of ethnicity to bring economic life back to part of the decaying inner city.

China Court was the first redevelopment project in the Chinese Quarter, begun in 1986 to the southeast of the city centre. It involved the refurbishment of a derelict three-storey warehouse around a ‘Chinese theme’ to encourage the ‘Orientalisation’ of the Quarter (Jackson, *ibid.*). Much of the decoration and detail originates in China and the 60,000 pagoda roof tiles were imported from Hong Kong. All units were let to Chinese businesses. With the development of China Court in place, the plan has been to continue upgrading the area and attract flows of capital from both local and overseas Chinese businesses and property developers. The phase two extension of the China Court redevelopment scheme was largely financed by Chinese private capital and was made the responsibility of the Chinese property developers Anglo-Oriental Properties Ltd. In recent years, the Chinese Quarter has witnessed a certain amount of gentrification of its existing buildings, such as the Chung Ying and Chung Yung Garden restaurants, in addition to further financial assistance (a £3.2m grant in 1990) from the City of Birmingham.

In 1998, businessman Wing Yip presented the city of Birmingham with the Pagoda (see Figure 1). This gift, shipped from China, acts as a gateway to the Chinese Quarter and was provided to advertise the presence and importance of the Chinese community in Birmingham (Chan, 2002 and forthcoming). Wing Yip was

also involved in the Heartlands regeneration initiative in the north of the city (Deakin and Edwards 1993). This is another area of substantial development, offering commercial activities, business units and facilities for the local Chinese community. Wing Yip was first to occupy this area of redevelopment in the early 1990s with a cash and carry business and later bought the adjoining land to create opportunities for further Chinese-owned development. In this instance a 'Gateway to Heaven', again built largely from specialist materials imported from China, acts as a boundary marker for the site.

The idea of the Chinese Quarter is clearly fused with the traditional route of early Hong Kong Chinese migrants into the catering industry during the 1950s and 1960s. It is estimated that 80% of the Birmingham Chinese are engaged in the food industry (Birmingham City Council, 1996b: 12); this, together with saturated markets in Chinese takeaways and restaurants, involves high risk despite the present prosperity of the community. Nevertheless, as the numbers of Chinese people in Birmingham and Britain have grown, they have developed their networks of kinship, capital and goods to take in family and business contacts in cities such as London, Manchester and Hong Kong, and used these connections to branch out from the restaurant business. Anglo-Oriental properties, led by 'local' overseas Chinese businessman Stephen Sham, has been a key agent in the development of the Chinese Quarter; Wing Yip's involvement in property development has been part of his broader move into food production and distribution.

The Wing Yip supermarket is one of Britain's largest Chinese shopping centres with a workforce of 78, and is part of a successful national chain involving stores in London, Edinburgh and Manchester (Keating, 2000). Stocking these stores requires a considerable import/export network and Wing Yip's business draws

extensively on linkages with China and its surrounding regions; the business also now supplies Wing Yip branded goods to the main supermarkets. As Irene Chu of the Birmingham Chinese Society explains, most Chinese business people in Birmingham have contacts in South East Asia and import a majority of their goods from this region, especially items such as Chinese foods for retail and wholesale that are not produced in the UK (interview, August 1997, in Dean, 1997). Thus, the development of the Chinese Quarter has been the product of a complex set of networks and partnerships involving the local City Council, national government, a number of Chinese business people and property developers and members of the Chinese community. Moreover, this long term process may be contrasted with the rather more recent, and almost overwhelming, interest by (inter)national trade and industry bodies in the growth of the Chinese economy.

Most recently, there has been further immigration from Hong Kong, and Birmingham has become a nodal point within new flows of overseas Chinese capital and people. A number of specialist travel agents have opened to service the increased flows, while the newly arrived Bank of China serves the local business community in Chinese dialects, with practices that are based on Hong Kong business customs [3]. If analyses of other contexts are any indication (Redding, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Seagrave, 1995; Thrift and Olds, 1996; Weidenbaum and Hughes, 1996; Yeung, 1998; Yeung and Olds, 2000), the success of Birmingham's Chinese community is based upon an element of competitive advantage and trust that is derived from ethnicity and transnational trading links. In turn, as one element of a broadening set of economic activities, the expansion of the economic horizons of Birmingham's Chinese business community has created new forms of investment and global linkage for the city. Indeed, in 2004, Birmingham hosted the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual European

Conference of Chinese Organisations, which attracted more than 400 delegates not only from across Europe and the rest of the UK but also from China, Singapore, Malaysia and the United States [4].

## **2. Ethnic food production**

Chinese food production is one example of transnational links related to the growth of the ethnic foods industry in Birmingham. Ethnic food manufacturing for both national and international distribution has grown significantly since the 1990s (see *Asian Business Directory 2002*; *Business Register Birmingham, 1997* [5]). This phenomenon might be linked to the concentration of ‘ethnic’ restaurants in the city and, more broadly, a growing ‘institutional thickness’ (Amin and Thrift, 1994). A climate in which ethnic restaurants thrive is likely to provide a favourable environment for food production with established support structures made up of networks of suppliers, business support (e.g. the Asian Business Association, the Bangladeshi Caterers Association, Asian Balti Restaurant Association), trading links and an influx of skilled workers. Birmingham has also seen a rise in local training initiatives (by the now defunct Training and Enterprise Council) geared towards the ethnic food sector. One example is the Balti Business Initiative, which aims to encourage local businesses to invest money in the development of the sector [6]. This follows similar initiatives in the local Chinese food industry. Wing Yip provides funding for a restaurant and full-time work experience placements at the Birmingham College of Food and Tourism. This has proved a successful method of encouraging non-Chinese students to acquire the expertise required in the Chinese food manufacturing industry. The College also has links with East End Foods (see below).

Some commentators, however, are more sceptical about the benefits of ethnic enclaves in Birmingham's food industry. Afro-Caribbean restaurateurs, for example, have struggled to access finance for their enterprises [7], while in their study of balti restaurants Ram *et al.* (2000) reject the idea of an ethnic enclave creating economic advantage. Instead, they argue that the balti industry is marginal and sub-optimal, with restaurateurs in Birmingham constantly undercutting each other through competition, with the result that individual businesses struggle to make a profit. While this is the case with the balti restaurant business, other food networks in Birmingham present a somewhat different picture. These tend to be less visible and less consumer-oriented than the balti industry, with more room for manoeuvre and innovation. Some have been, effectively, 'market makers' because of their transnational linkages.

One example is East End Foods, a family-run grocery wholesaling and cash and carry operation set up in 1972 and now one of the UK's largest importers/exporters of Indian foods, including pulses, rice, lentils, peas, beans, spices, chutneys and pickles (Ind, 1998). The company, housed in large premises at Digbeth and Smethwick, employs 130 people and had a turnover of £90m in 2003-4 [8]. In 2004, it was ranked 91<sup>st</sup> in the UK's 'Top 100' firms in the manufacture of food products and beverages [9]. It began as a small grocery shop selling to both Asian and European customers, using a small amount of personal capital and extensive credit from Asian suppliers. It specialised initially in Indian products but soon expanded into a wide range of other foods. It now imports and packs over 500 products and has over 1150 lines in Indian food products [10]. The company has recently received plaudits for its export performance, selling £5m of goods to the EU in 2003-4 and

expecting 40 per cent export growth in 2004-5. As the UK Government's Europe Minister Dennis MacShane put it recently,

innovators like East End Foods are carving out niches for themselves in the European Single Market. I'm delighted to learn that they are exporting some British diversity to the continent [11].

The company sources from as far away as Australia and New Zealand and exports beyond the EU to Canada and the USA.

The success of East End Foods is due largely to its early involvement in canning small amounts of Asian foods, imported from India and sold under its own label, which expanded as demand grew from supermarkets for a range of 'ethnic' products. It is also rooted in transnational networks (in this case trade links back to India, with the diasporic Indian/Sikh community, and through connections with families and friends) and knowledge of cultures required to develop niche products, which have allowed it to capture a significant part of the ethnic foods business. The canning venture was highly successful and the range and quality of own label products have expanded to the point where it now accounts for about a third of total turnover. Another factor in its favour was the expansion of both Asian-owned retail outlets and the wider European market. The cash and carry operation was added to the wholesaling business in order to accommodate smaller retail customers. The main market for their Asian foodstuffs, however, is large supermarket multiples in the UK and Europe.

Further examples of Birmingham's growing and successful food manufacturing industry include Wine and Dine, which supplies 40% of the UK retail chilled salad dressings market. This was originally a Greek restaurant that started making dishes and dips in response to customer demand. It now concentrates on

manufacturing, employs a workforce of nearly 100 people, and its turnover increased from £2.9 million in 1996 to £6 million in 1999 (*Birmingham Voice*, 1999b). Sunrise Bakery in Smethwick is a family-run West Indian food processing and manufacturing enterprise, supplying customers in the Midlands, the North, Greater London and the South East since the 1970s. Other emerging food producers in Birmingham include Spice Time (producers of fresh and frozen ready meals), Eastern Foods (nan and pitta bread makers), King Spice, Cleone Foods (manufacturers of Caribbean savoury patties and included from 2002 in the UK Inner City 100 list of the country's fastest growing companies [12]), Chocolate Temptations, BABA enterprises (the UK's largest manufacturer of fresh poppadums), Bakes (a specialist in Caribbean sweet breads and snacks), Raja Frozen Foods, Euro Ice Cream (creators of the world's largest balti ice cream range) and Giro Foods (importers of exotic spices and ingredients).

Many of these businesses are family-owned with a largely self-employed workforce. They are also relatively small, employing less than 20 people. Food manufacturers in Birmingham use their knowledge of the consumption patterns of their own ethnic group, coupled with familial and community-based support structures, to manufacture a product aimed at a niche market - either people within that ethnic group or the increasing numbers of people sampling foods from outside their own culture. The industry is also characterised by high levels of innovation. A large number of businesses in Birmingham supply speciality foods, such as Indian sweets for weddings, or halal Chinese and baby foods. In addition, as the example of East End Foods demonstrates, recent years have witnessed expansion of manufacturing to supply British and European supermarkets with ethnic foods, particularly in the form of Indian ready meals. In this case, the speciality foods are

tailored more to European tastes (*Financial Times Food Business*, July 1998). Thus, where Pakistani and Indian restaurants have failed to establish a foothold, the availability of ethnic foods in European supermarkets is likely to pave the way for an increased demand for ethnic food more broadly. This will increase the opportunity for ethnic food manufacturers in Birmingham to export internationally. Ethnic food manufacturers are also likely to have competitive advantage as they make use of transnational and local trade links, overcoming barriers to trade by building on relationships based on a combination of family, ethnic and other business ties (see Bates, 1985; Mitchell, 1993). These transnational linkages have helped to establish Birmingham as ‘a world-class centre of excellence for ethnic food production’ (Paul Spooner, Director of Economic Development, *Birmingham Voice*, 2000: 3).

### **3. The Bhangra music industry**

Birmingham’s Bhangra music industry is another example of economic transnationalism that informs a re-visioning of Birmingham’s economy. Recent years have produced a great deal of critical writing about the cultural politics of music and, particularly, the consumption of different musical styles. Indeed, music has been seen as a site where racialised power relations are played out against a backdrop of exploitation and appropriation (Jackson, 1989; Burnett, 1996). Focusing on production within the music industry, particularly in cities like Birmingham, allows a rather different story to be told: one of innovation, fusion and transnationalism. The music industry in Birmingham is significant because of the prominence within it of people from minority ethnic groups. If there has been a “serious dearth of insightful writing into the long history of the involvement of British Asians in musical cultures”

(Back, 1996: 227-8), there is perhaps even less written about their involvement in the production side of the music industry.

Bhangra is part of vibrant Black music cultures and is inseparable from the local multicultural urban spaces that provide the crucial context for the formation of its sounds. It is therefore very different to so-called 'World Music', which is accused of the objectification, categorisation and appropriation of 'exotic' musical forms by the white middle classes. British Bhangra developed out of the more traditional forms of folk dances and music of the people of the Punjab, arriving in Britain in the late 1960s with migration from South Asia and East Africa. It emerged in the mid-1980s among second generation South Asian-British musicians, primarily in Birmingham and west London. It combines the robust and energetic punctuated rhythms of double-sided drums (*dhol*, later replaced by *tumbi* and *dholak*), modern technology and urban sounds with Punjabi poetry, traditional Punjabi lyrics, acrobatic dance skills and celebrations of the Punjabi harvest festival (*bhaisakhi*). In the 1980s, it played an important role in proclaiming a cultural identity for groups of youths defining themselves as South Asian-British. Throughout the 1990s, Bhangra was characterised by ongoing processes of fusion with broader ranges of musical styles (ragga, reggae, rap, soul, jazzfunk, rock, hip-hop, pop), both to reflect the lived experiences of South Asian-Britons in the 1990s, and as an attempt to 'cross-over' into mainstream charts. It is also the antecedent to newer and more fashionable forms of post-Bhangra and 'Asian Kool', which have been less marginalized by mainstream culture and are part of an emergent and vibrant British-Asian urban youth culture.

Although numerous British South Asians enjoy this music genre in other cities (especially London), Birmingham is by far the cultural capital for Bhangra music (Kumar, 1998) and is claimed to be responsible for producing almost 90 per cent of

the UK's Bhangra music [13]. The city is home to internationally renowned groups and artists such as Bhujangy, Safri Boys, Apna Group (formerly Apna Sangeet), Apache Indian and Malkit Singh and to several major recording and distribution companies. Among these is Oriental Star Agency, established in the 1970s in Moseley (see Figure 1) and home to internationally renowned singers such as Bally Sagoo and Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, both of whom featured in a recent Sunday Times list of the Greatest 100 musicians of all time [14]. Another example is Moviebox, which began as a video-audio rental store in Small Heath in 1985, importing and exporting music to and from India and Pakistan and becoming a major distributor and wholesaler of Asian music in the UK. In 1995, the Moviebox record label was launched, now home to Band Baja Boys and B21 [15]. Other production companies include Nachural records (established in 1991 in Moseley), Hi-Tech (Smethwick), Music World/Rainbow (Handsworth) and Mega Music (previously owned by Roma, Handsworth). These companies and artists like Bally Sagoo and Malkit Singh have received international exposure through popular films like *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) and their associated soundtracks.

Birmingham is also the centre for a steady production of new albums and a growing number of live DJs. Recent years have seen the emergence of newer bands such as D/I/P, XLNC, Achanak, Ahista, Anakhi, East-West Connection and Avtar Maniac, all signed to Nachural, and B21, DCS, Pardesi, Golden Star and Midland Boyz. Birmingham-based artists like Malkit Singh have achieved popularity in Asia, Canada, the US and UK, even reaching the Indian community in Australia (Mitchell, 1996: 61). In addition, the city is home to several nationally and internationally renowned composers and producers, one of the most prominent being Harjinder Boparai. Boparai has produced albums by many Birmingham Bhangra artists

including Safri Boys, Apache Indian, Anakhi and Malkit Singh. In 1996, he signed a publishing deal with Warner Chappell Music and formally set up his own music production company, HSB Productions. To date, he has composed title and incidental music for 26 BBC, independent and Sky Digital television series, including *Network East, East, Bollywood or Bust, Asia 2, Flavours of India, Safe TV* and *Big Talk*, and several national and regional BBC Radio stations. His work is also international; he has produced music for Canadian television and radio and in 1999 visited Singapore to establish projects there for HSB Productions [16].

Kumar (1998: 20-21) has argued that such a collection of artists, musical talent and production expertise, as well as the increasing live performance of British Bhangra at gigs and private celebratory parties, helps to constitute a unique form of cultural production and music industry in Birmingham. Despite huge sales of relatively cheaply priced music and significant transnational flows of imports and exports most Bhangra remains relatively marginalized within the broader music industry, being virtually ignored (or stereotyped) by the mainstream music press and handicapped by poor retail and distribution. The economic infrastructure is still full of contradictions (Banerji and Baumann, 1990: 148). The musicians themselves often produce the albums and large parts of the industry are still quite amateurish (Kumar 1998). One alternative is to produce in India, as Malkit Singh has done with his Handsworth-based band Golden Star, allowing them to succeed in capturing enthusiastic audiences with Indian productions in both the UK and the sub-continent. In addition, Singh has been instrumental in arguing for greater capital injections into the industry in order to maintain quality. Although this means higher retail prices (Singh's first 15 albums all sold for £2.50, then at £4.00 and his latest in 2003 at £10), increasingly producers and artists are recognising the need for increased injections of

finance [17]. Furthermore, Birmingham City Council has suggested that the Handsworth area (see Figure 1) could be recognised as a Punjabi cultural region with proper support for local businesses, including the music industry (Birmingham City Council, 1996: 59).

Piracy remains a major obstacle to Bhangra musicians turning professional. In addition, live DJs are now more popular than live bands at weddings and club functions because of cost, and this has considerable impacts on bands, in some cases deterring new talent (Boparai, pers. comm.). However, clearly many bands do professionalize successfully and become major international performers.

Birmingham-based Apache Indian (aka Steven Kapur) was the first South Asian British musician to break into the mainstream UK charts in 1993; he is now an international star. Although he does not claim to be a Bhangra singer, Apache's music combines ragga, rap and reggae with Bhangra and pop; his music epitomises the hybrid nature of the fusion musical scene in Birmingham, and symbolizes the dynamic culture of the city (see Back and Nayak, 1993) and the transnational links that underpin many of its cultural industries.

The Birmingham Bhangra scene is a highly integrated trading community with a strong support network. The importance of transnational networks in the success of the Bhangra industry are epitomised by Birmingham producer Bally Sagoo, who remixes Bombay film music using Western sampling and remixing technologies. This is distributed to Western audiences and those in the sub-continent through a deal with distribution giants, Sony. As Sharma (1996: 27) argues, the increasing availability of this Western-produced Bombay music in South Asia through satellite and record deals is promoting new forms of musical cultures in India, which in turn is having an impact upon the Asian urban music in the West. Bhangra is thus a hybrid

musical form that positions Birmingham within transnational cultural and economic networks. Furthermore, evidence suggests that this cultural industry is expanding more widely into various forms of media. For example, Asia 1 TV studios in Birmingham is a digital television channel aimed at the Punjabi speaking communities of Europe and is in partnership with ANI/Reuters in Delhi and Star (India), B-Sky-B's sister company (*Birmingham Voice*, 1999a).

### **Problematizing transnationalism**

There are, of course, dangers inherent in valorising and celebrating uncritically ethnicity and hybridity, and of being too optimistic about the possibilities of economic transnationalism against the backdrop of the polarising effects of global capitalism. As Sharma (1996: 29) argues, the promotion of British Asians like Bally Sagoo by global giants such as Sony exemplifies the privileging of migrancy in postcolonial discourses by global capitalism:

The recent turn, in the avant-garde sectors of the Western academy, to the study of marginal culture, has failed to engage adequately with the oppressive dynamics of this mode of reorganised capitalism... [T]he project of celebrating hybrid 'ethnic' cultures obscures the epistemic violence of Western intellectual knowledge..., reduces 'Other' cultures to essentialist and 'traditional' fixities – as 'victims' of progress, as objects of tourism, as the labour of migration and the colours of multiculturalism – and then valorizes hybridity as their encounter with the emancipated West.

Clearly, the success of Birmingham's overseas Chinese business community, or the vibrancy of its 'ethnic foods' industry, or the brilliance and skill of Punjabi producers and musicians in securing space for themselves within popular culture should not

blind us to the harsh realities facing immigrants all over the world (Lipsitz, 1997). Certainly, much of Birmingham's multi-ethnic economy is still characterised by low wages, poor working conditions, and racism. People of different ethnicity working within the same sector very often have different experiences. For example, Smallbone *et al.* (2001) have explored the relative difficulties that African Caribbean restaurateurs face in accessing finance and business support in comparison with Chinese and white restaurateurs. Nor should the different experiences of people from within the same minority ethnic group, based on such factors as class and gender, be homogenised. The realities of living in Birmingham are likely to be very different, for example, between wealthy Chinese property developers and those serving in fast-food restaurants. Moreover, transnationalism can exacerbate the already intense competitive pressures that, for example, Asian clothing manufacturers face, which could have the effect of increasing reliance on less formal working practices.

In reconceptualizing Birmingham's economy we need to be wary of over-privileging diaspora, migrancy and hybridity, since this encounter of 'Third World' cultures with the West becomes the framework through which 'non-Western' cultures are interpreted. Hybrid ethnic cultures are valorised and celebrated, but this further marginalizes 'traditional cultures', the colonial encounter remains privileged and the global domain of cultural capital remains unchallenged. It is widely acknowledged that racism is still a barrier to employment in Britain, resulting in high rates of self-employment amongst minority ethnic groups (Metcalf *et al.*, 1996, Mason 2003). Minority ethnic groups in Birmingham experience greater problems of access to quality jobs and need special support in business ventures; they are also more exposed to unemployment and low wages (Killeen, 1999) [18].

It should also be remembered that migration and experiences of transnationalism are deeply embedded in gender relations. As Salih (2000) argues, access to global mobility is gendered, yet in recent literature on transnationalism there is a tendency to ignore the ways in which nation-states and global economic restructuring are operating in gendered ways (*cf.* Willis and Yeoh, 2000; Fouron and Schiller, 2001; Robins and Aksoy, 2001). Transnational spheres are not only contingent upon the vulnerability of migrants within global economic systems, but are inscribed in specific cultural and normative constraints that often work to disempower women. It is perhaps ironic, therefore, given these problems and the fact that economic transnationalism is often a response to obstacles to socio-economic integration, that the diversity of Birmingham's population and their position within transnational networks could be an important element in its economic future.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has attempted to provide a relational understanding of Birmingham as a city with a multi-ethnic population that has long established linkages with worlds outside the city's boundaries (Smith, 2001). This relational perspective also shifts emphasis away from bounded notions of space that feature prominently in much of the 'ethnic entrepreneurialism' literatures. The networks we have highlighted in Birmingham - Chinese business networks, ethnic foods and Bhangra music industries - illustrate three things. First, forms of capital investment, like labour, are (multi)cultural and may have specific culturally informed outcomes. Second, a key element of the investment strategies of certain forms of (multicultural) capital is the 'diaspora'; in other words, investment through transnational ethnic community-based networks and feedback into the source community, which provides both knowledge

and expertise and a market for the produce in advanced market economies.

Birmingham, as a multicultural city, is one such meeting place of the global diaspora(s). Third, the cultural domain is highly significant in understanding connections between the local and the global and in uncovering forms of agency that are usually ignored in traditional economic narratives of global cities, in general, and Birmingham's regeneration, in particular. Thus if we take seriously the arguments of Smith (2001) and Ley (2004), Birmingham is a distinctive global city, but this distinctiveness is not based on its recent and very substantial development of prestige urban regeneration projects or even its marketing slogan as 'The Meeting Place of Europe'. Rather, its global distinctiveness is, in part, based on its residents' diasporic and transnational (economic) roots, which extend across Europe into Asia and the Pacific Rim.

The question remains, however, is it possible to create competitive advantage that is less exclusionary and that translates into material gain for working class and minority ethnic communities? Questions such as these are of critical importance to a multicultural and post-colonial city such as Birmingham, still struggling against the social and economic effects of the restructuring of its manufacturing industries. The city's multiculturalism and its position within post-colonial and transnational economic networks are rapidly being recognised as a crucial element of continued economic development. The City Council has been at the centre of the construction of the Chinese Quarter in the Hurst Street area and a proposed Balti Quarter in Sparkbrook/Sparkhill. Similarly, a number of ethnic community forums have been developed inclusive of Economic Development Officers. Such initiatives reflect the first explicit statement on multicultural economic development in the City Council's Economic Strategy Vision Document in 1998 and, in early 2000 the city appointed its

first development manager for African Caribbean businesses. Nevertheless, a number of concerns remain. First, there is the potential for such policy initiatives to create particular, and fixed, versions of ethnicity and multiculturalism. Second, how is policy to deal with the oft-cited reluctance of minority ethnic businesses to use or engage with mainstream avenues of business support (Ram and Smallbone, 2002)? Third, as we have suggested, and as the work of Ram *et al.* (2000) illustrates, there is nothing to suggest that ethnic minority enterprises are not subject to class and gender exploitation. It is important, therefore, in recognising the significance of minority ethnic networks to a relational conceptualisation of city economies to retain a critical eye on their working practices.

There is a pressing need for further research that examines how transnational networks might produce distinctive competitive advantage for different cities and regions (as they continue to ‘go global’) in a way that could combat the social and economic polarisation that has accompanied mainstream neo-liberal forms of economic development. In other words, under what conditions do such transnational networks facilitate progressive socio-economic change as opposed to locking individuals into ethnic enclaves that are subject to exploitation, racism and exclusion? What are the possibilities of, and constraints facing, these networks as empowering sources of social action and capital? Recent research is beginning to tease out some of these issues by following specific commodity networks, such as Asian fashion and foods, and their circuitry in other contexts (for example, Hardill and Raghuram, 1998; Crang *et al.*, 2000, 2003; Dwyer and Jackson, 2003; Werbner, 1999, 2001; see also Cook 2003). For Werbner (1999, 548), the focus on the commodity is a political strategy that allows us to “move away from invidious stereotypes of different ethnic groups” and their cultures. Theoretically, exploring such commodities and the

networks through which they flow is another way of thinking relationally about multicultural cities and their insertion into the ‘national/global’ economy (Allen *et al.*, 1998).

Cities such as Birmingham would benefit from embracing more fully the notion of multicultural economic development. This is about recognising the cultural diversity of economic activity in policy terms and encouraging it in the expectation that such diversity brings with it a broadening of the economic base. To this end, Birmingham has a rich and distinctive cultural base upon which to draw. The precise contribution of these networks to the city’s economic base is still a matter of conjecture, but our research into examples of economic transnationalism within the city reveals how diversity might be mobilised “as a source of both social cohesion and urban economic competitiveness” (Amin, 1997: 134). Far from being a post-industrial city whose glories as ‘the workshop of the world’ have long since faded, Birmingham is a working example of multicultural economic development and a city that is constituted through transnational networks and flows. With foresight and progressive policies aimed at recognising and supporting this, Birmingham could yet become one of the ‘post-colonial workshops of the world’.

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Notes:

[1] Of course, we might also be critical of the impact this is likely to have on Mumbai's future position in global IT networks. However, Khadria's (1999) study of Indian knowledge workers migrating to the US discusses positive effects of this migration, with transnational links and cooperation producing human development-led growth of 'human capital' in the country of origin. This return of human capital can be thought of as a 'second-generation' effect of a 'brain drain'.

[2] For an excellent review of this literature see Ram and Jones (1998).

[3] Bound up with these connections (but more difficult to trace) is the extent to which they mean that Chinese people in Birmingham place themselves in a transnational Chinese imaginary. As Dean (1997: 39) argues, while individuals have their own relation to this, the public discourse of Chinese business people has been keen to strategically draw upon the idea of the Chinese as successful transnational citizens in a way that reflects their own position as a highly mobile group maintaining strong connections with other Chinese transnationals.

[4] <http://www.minority4business.co.uk/connews.asp?renleewtsapf=1171>, accessed 1 October 2004.

[5] *Business Register Birmingham* (1997) lists 18 food manufacturing and wholesale companies specialising in products ranging from frozen baltis, pickled fruit, bread, halal foods and sweets. *Asian Business Directory* (1997/8) lists a further 9 businesses, and recent newspaper reports suggest that at least another 10 food manufacturing businesses have been established since 1998 (see *Birmingham Voice*, 1999c; 2000).

[6] Interview with Helen Rodway, Birmingham Training and Enterprise Council, 18/9/98.

- [7] Personal communication with Cline-Cole, Centre for West African Studies, University of Birmingham (see also Smallbone *et al.* 2001).
- [8] <http://www.bci.org.uk/jointhechamber/press%20releases>, accessed 01/10/04.
- [9] <http://www.top500.de/g0021539.htm>, accessed 01/10/04.
- [10] <http://www.eastendfoods.co.uk/eastindex.htm>, accessed 01/10/04.
- [11] <http://www.bci.org.uk/jointhechamber/press%20releases>, accessed 01/10/04.
- [12] <http://www.sbs.gov.uk/default.php?page=/socialenterprise/awards/innercity100.php> accessed 01/10/04.
- [13] [http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/capital\\_of\\_culture/highlights.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/capital_of_culture/highlights.shtml), accessed 01/10/04.
- [14] <http://www.osa.co.uk>, accessed 01/10/04.
- [15] <http://www.moviebox.co.uk>, accessed 01/10/04.
- [16] Personal communication. See also <http://www.hsb-productions.co.uk/hsbtvrad.htm>
- [17] Harjinder Boparai, interview with Malkit Singh, <http://www.hsb-productions.co.uk/Malkit3.htm>
- [18] In 1998, those wards with highest concentrations of minority ethnic populations also had the highest rates of unemployment: Aston – 23.4%; Handsworth – 19.1%; Ladywood – 21.3%; Nechells – 19.7%; Small Heath – 16.5%; Soho – 16.3%; Sparkbrook – 25.3%; Sparkhill – 17.1%. In addition, 49% of Pakistani/Bangladeshi workers earn less than £4.50 per hour, compared with 31% of white workers (Killeen, 1999).

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**Figure 1 Birmingham city centre and outlying economic districts**