Maz T Collins · Nov 30, 2024 · 7 min read

Is there still a Black Community in the UK?

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Kemi Badenoch, the first Black woman to lead a major political party in the UK, has controversially suggested that the concept of a Black community should be "consigned to history," arguing that it no longer reflects modern realities. So, is the Black community still relevant, or has growing diversity made the concept outdated? Can a collective Black identity persist amidst differing histories, nationalities, religions, and socio-economic experiences? Or do shared systemic challenges continue to unify Black Britons?

In this blog post, we'll explore how the concept of a 'Black community' in the UK has evolved and whether it remains relevant today. Has the idea of a tightly unified Black community become outdated, replaced by a more fluid notion of a Black population with looser connections? Let's dive in and unpack this question.

The Foundations of a Black Community in Britain

To answer these questions, it's important to reflect on how the concept of the 'Black community' has evolved over time. It was never just a cultural construct - it was born out of necessity. Black communities have existed in the UK since at least the early 1500s, brought to Britain through various routes: some were brought via enslavement as servants, others worked on ships or served as soldiers in the Napoleonic Wars, the American War of Independence, and later the First World War. Some also came as students who chose to stay.

These communities were primarily based in seaport cities like London, Bristol, Cardiff's Tiger Bay, and Liverpool, making them some of the UK's oldest Black communities. Though small in number—fewer than 0.1% of the population until the mid-20th century—these groups were highly diverse, including West Africans, Caribbean's, and sailors or 'Lascars' from the Asian continent, East and Southern Africa. There were also members of the poor white working class, often women who had married Black men. They supported one another against widespread social prejudice, though they rarely referred to themselves explicitly as a "Black community."

> The arrival of the Windrush generation in 1948 marked a pivotal moment in the formation of a Black community. As they helped rebuild post-war Britain, they faced widespread hostility, much like earlier Black communities, but on a much larger scale. The discriminatory signs, "No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish," became a stark symbol of the blatant discrimination they encountered.

whose family had been British-born for generations—alongside Roy Hackett, Owen Henry, Audley Evans, and Prince Brown from the campaigning group the West Indian Development Council.

They built support systems through community centres, churches, and pardner savings groups. For instance, after being made unwelcome at his local church, Dr. Oliver A. Lyseight founded the New Testament Church of God, providing a refuge for Black immigrants who often faced racism in white churches. (1) Similarly, "pardner" saving groups were established to help members buy homes, which they rented out rooms to fellow migrants. These institutions nurtured a sense of belonging.

The Black community of the 1950s and 1960s wasn't just focused on survival—it became a platform for political mobilisation. Activists such as Claudia Jones and David Pitt, alongside groups like the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, fought for legislative and societal change, laying the foundation for the UK's civil rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s. This generation of Caribbean and African migrants, together with existing Black Britons, built a collective identity to confront racism and exclusion. While they didn't always label themselves as a "Black community," their actions reflected unity and resilience.

The Rise of the Black British identity

Today, some mistakenly believe the term "Black British" was imposed by the state. In truth, it was coined by the children of Caribbean immigrants. Born and raised in the UK, these young people rejected their parents' slower, cautious approach to life. They embraced change, recognising that despite its racial challenges, Britain was their home.

Black British youth faced systemic barriers in various aspects of life. In education, they were often steered into lower academic tiers and subjected to harsher disciplinary measures. They were also disproportionately targeted by the police under the controversial SUS laws, which allowed stop-and-search based solely on suspicion. Beyond these institutional challenges, they endured violence from far-right groups such as the National Front.

> In response to these shared struggles, they adopted "Black" as a unifying identity—one that transcended national or ethnic boundaries and reflected their collective experience.

“Black” became a political coalition, an umbrella term for people in the UK who were likely to experience discrimination based on their skin colour—essentially, anyone who was not white. For example, the British Black Panthers Party, founded by Nigerian-born Obi Egbuna in 1968, focused on resisting police brutality, adopting the principle of "political blackness" to unite not just African and Caribbean communities, but also members of the South Asian community in their shared struggle against systemic injustice.

This era witnessed a vibrant cultural renaissance. Reggae, ska, and dub poetry emerged as powerful forms of resistance, with artists like Linton Kwesi Johnson confronting systemic racism through their evocative work. Meanwhile, genres like Lovers Rock and UK Soul achieved global recognition, with Black British acts such as Loose Ends, Five Star, and Soul II Soul gaining prominence in the American R&B scene. The literary world thrived, with authors like Buchi Emecheta and Caryl Phillips delving into themes of migration, identity, and belonging. In cinema, filmmakers like Horace Ové spotlighted Black British experiences through influential works like as *Pressure* and *A Hole in Babylon*, breaking new ground in storytelling.

The 1981 New Cross Fire, in which 13 Black youths tragically lost their lives, became a pivotal moment for racial justice, igniting the Black People's Day of Action, where over 20,000 marched through London demanding accountability and change. This era also witnessed a surge in political activism and cultural expression. Significant milestones included the Race Relations Act of 1976, which tackled indirect discrimination, and Diane Abbott's historic 1987 election as the first Black woman in Parliament, marking a watershed in political representation. Organisations like the Black Sections of the Labour Party played a crucial role in amplifying Black and Asian voices in politics, further shaping the fight for equality.

By the 1990s, the concept of political Blackness began to wane, and the term "Black British" became more closely associated with people of African and Afro-Caribbean descent. (2) The second generation of Black Britons, born and raised in the UK, forged a unique identity that blended their ancestral heritage with British culture. This hybrid identity shaped contemporary understandings of what it means to be Black British, a term initially embraced by African immigrants as well.

A Changing Black Population

By the 2000s, however, many first generation African migrants began prioritising their national identities over collective terms like "Black British." Migration from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Somalia during this period reshaped the demographic composition of Black Britain. (3) Africans became the majority, outnumbering Caribbean Britons two to one. These migrants arrived for diverse reasons: to study, work in the NHS and care sectors, reunite with family, or seek asylum. (3) Some also migrated from European countries like the Netherlands and Denmark after gaining citizenship there, enriching Black Britain with cultural and linguistic diversity.

While contributing to the broader Black British identity, many first generation African migrants preferred specific identifiers, such as Nigerian-British or Somali-British, reflecting strong national pride. For refugees, survival and rebuilding their lives often took precedence over adopting collective terms like "Black British," which they found disconnected from their immediate realities. Globalisation and the digital age further reinforced individualism, as digital connectivity and easier travel maintained strong ties to home countries, complicating efforts to forge a unified identity.

These differences occasionally led to tensions between African and Caribbean-descended Britons. For second and third generation Caribbean Britons, the collective struggle against systemic racism remains central to their identi contrast, many first generation African migrants, who arrived after significant civil rights milestones, may feel less urgency to adopt Blackness as a political identity. Public figures like Kemi Badenoch have attempted to capitalise on these debates, questioning whether terms like "Black community" still capture the complexities of modern Black British experiences.

Does the Black Community Still Exist?

Despite increasing diversity, shared systemic challenges continue to unify Black Britons. Unemployment rates for Black Britons remain disproportionately high compared to White Britons, and racial disparities persist in healthcare, education, and policing. (4) Black women face disproportionately high maternal mortality rates, and Black men are disproportionately subjected to stop-and-search measures and overrepresented in the prison system. (5)

Movements like Black Lives Matter demonstrate the enduring potential for collective action. Though the concept of a "Black community" may be less cohesive than during the Windrush era, solidarity around systemic inequality remains powerful. Generational shifts are also reshaping identity dynamics, with the second generation of African Britons leading a cultural renaissance. Building on the legacies of the 1970s and 1980s, contemporary artists such as Stormzy, Michaela Coel, Dave, and J Hus redefine representation, while genres like UK Grime and Afroswing highlight the creative evolution of a modern Black British identity.

Initiatives like UK Black History Month, championed by Ghanaian activist Akyaaba Addai-Sebo, also foster dialogue and collaboration, bridging divides within the Black British population. These efforts highlight how diversity and shared history can coexist within a broader collective identity.

> So, is there still a Black community in the UK? The answer largely depends on how we define “community.” If we consider it as the tightly unified groups of the Windrush era, then the answer is no. However, the Black British population continues to share systemic barriers and

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Rather than questioning whether the Black community still exists, it may be more productive to explore how it ac and thrives in an ever-changing society. By embracing diversity alongside shared challenges, Black Britons can forge an inclusive identity that honours the past while celebrating modern experiences.

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