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## Notes from a SIETAR Newbie

After having attended my very first SIETAR conference, I found myself reflecting on what felt like a very rich day. I am a new member and this was a UK annual Business of Culture event held in London. The venue was comfortable and spacious, the registration folks welcoming, and the participants themselves engaging and interesting to talk with.

There was a lot of rich and contemporary content, presented wonderfully by the three keynote speakers. Let me talk about each of them, and share the reflections that their presentations evoked in me.

First we had Professor Ram Gidoomal CBE, millionaire entrepreneur, philanthropist and author; whose talk was about leveraging diversity in the modern economy. He spared us an academic treatise, and told us his story instead. Ram came to the UK as a refugee from East Africa. I wondered if he was one of the 80,000 Asians expelled by Idi Amin in the 1970s, of whom Britain took in 27,000. Ram's family managed to rebuild their life by opening a chain of successful corner shops initially. What is the streak of invincible entrepreneurship that drives a family that has lost everything to succeed in a strange land?

Ram's is a high-profile story because of what he has personally achieved, and it is also a story echoed in so many lives here and wherever Indian exiles have taken shelter. What enabled his family to succeed in Britain was a keen spirit of enquiry and observation driven by the belief that opportunities existed if they looked hard enough, and the loving support of the family members for each other. The survival instinct was strong, as well as the drive to provide opportunities for the next generation to fulfil their potential.

There was a natural (Indian?) curiosity in their new surroundings and fellow citizens. Their first break came when they discovered a niche through friendly conversations. Most of their customers at the corner shop were Irish building labourers. What did this community miss, away from their own homeland? They began stocking these items. Pretty soon Irish people from a radius of 10 miles were coming to their little shop in North London, to spend their Friday pay packets!

Ram's story reminded me of Mira Nair's wonderful 1991 film *Mississippi Masala*, depicting the resettlement of an Indian family after the expulsion of Asians from Uganda. Kiran Desai's recent Booker prize winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, also came to mind. How do people deal with the traumas and adjustments of resettlement, the heavy silence that masks a nagging pain, the nostalgia for the country they called home? All these intertwined stories bear witness to the incredible resilience of the human spirit. There is a determination not to let misfortunes tie them down even as their own fortunes were irreparably reversed, a determination to remake their lives. This remaking is not possible

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without a visceral cultural adaptation that goes far beyond an academic appreciation of cultural difference!

Now I move on to Helen Tse's fascinating personal story of three generations of Chinese women, told in her book *Sweet Mandarin*, released just this month. Helen is a finance lawyer and the first British-born Chinese author. She recently opened an award-winning restaurant in Manchester with her two sisters, also called Sweet Mandarin.

China is a country I have had little exposure to, and Helen's talk redressed this imbalance a little. Helen's life, personally and professionally, is certainly mediated very much by her dual cultural identity of being "British-born Chinese" as she defines herself. I rather like that, and will call myself Indian-born British, I think, rather than British Asian or British Indian!

Helen is representative of the modern breed of young, highly educated and successful Chinese women in the UK. She has combined her passion for food with her law career, and contributes to integration in the community by teaching, in partnership with a local college, the highly popular course "Secrets of the Wok" to British kids. Helen has grappled with questions of personal identity (not least of all, answering that old question "Where are you from?" ... *Manchester* ... "Yes, but where are you really from?"), and is comfortable in her own skin.

The theme of using food as a cultural integrator is ever present in Helen's life, whether it is having two Christmas dinners, or restoring her grandmother's original enterprise of having a family restaurant. She sees food, music, and art as gentle ways to ease others enjoyably into an unfamiliar culture. In our own intercultural journeys, these experiences can teach us far more than any textbook can.

I am reminded of the evocative novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, and other writing that explicitly uses food as a metaphor for life, relationships and culture. I use an exercise called *You are What You Eat* sometimes in working with groups, as part of unpacking the personal impact that culture has had on each one of us. After all, a symposium on food several years ago at the Johns Hopkins University in USA concluded that "food and eating are one with the human heart"!

The final speaker was the charming and often hilarious Kate Fox, social anthropologist and author of the bestselling *Watching the English: Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. Kate had us chuckling immediately, starting with the "modest self-deprecation, preferably ironic" rule of English behaviour that conflicted with the "shameless self promotion" rule that her publishers required!

In facilitating cross-cultural awareness, we often say that any culture's "unwritten codes" work only if both parties know the code. Kate unpacks the enigmatic behavioural grammar that is ever prevalent in English society, and gets inside the stereotype rather than beyond it. Having come to live in the UK in my 30s, I can certainly vouch for Kate's assertion that "culture is learnable" – it's a trial and error process and you find out the importance of a 'rule' by testing it. She says that humour is one of the most difficult 'rules' to learn. I've found it to be a great bridge-builder in any culture.

As Victor Borge, the late famous Danish-American comedian said, “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people”.

Having recently written on the Big Brother media storm ([www.CoachZee.blogspot.com](http://www.CoachZee.blogspot.com)), I found it interesting that Ram Gidoomal referred to it in his talk, and Arun Singh (Vice President of Sietar UK) asked Kate for her take on it. Kate’s answer was that the *response* to the perceived racial bullying was indicative of modern British society, rather than the main instigator being representative of British culture. The strength of any rule is tested by our feelings to its breach. The reaction of the great British public showed that racism, bad manners and cultural ignorance are not appreciated in this country!

I couldn’t help observing that I didn’t see any Black people at the conference. There were a few Chinese and Indians (I didn’t notice any other Asians), a few Americans and several Europeans. We also had a classic case of possible cultural misunderstanding at the end in our breakout group work on a case study. It escalated into a sort of circular argument in the larger group, and it would have been really interesting to use it in a Gestalt way, working with the immediacy of the situation to draw out the intercultural learnings. Unfortunately I couldn’t stay to the very end as I had a train to catch.

In closing, it was a most enjoyable learning and networking event, aimed at practitioners rather than academics. My first but certainly not my last encounter with the SIETAR community!